

Don't Ask Me Why

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Summary: How would a Corny Collins reunion go on without Corny Collins? Will he be found? Dedicated to Writergirl2003.

ambercorny

1. Chapter 1

Chapter one

Suddenly the phone began to ring off the hook. From all around the country.

"What was your motivation, Mr. Collins, for bringing Negro children onto the show?"

"Do you intent to have Colored dancers on the same stage as the white kids?"

"Will they dance TOGETHER?"

"Will interracial relationships be discouraged?"

"Are you considering other races as members of the council?"

"Have you had any death threats?"

"WHAT were you thinking?"

Corny hung up the phone for the last time. He lifted the handset, listened gently for the dial tone and put it down on the desk. Not long after a loud beeping tone began then just as quickly, the sound was gone. He let out a deep sigh. The whole experience was a wild ride. He was in the national spotlight. With the sweep of a hand and a split second decision, Inez Stubbs became the lead dancer on the Corny Collins Show and Corny didn't regret it. In fact, he was quite pleased with how the entire show turned out.

He loved the new Motown style that was frowned upon by the management, and scooted in to listen on Negro Day. Many of the Colored Council considered him a friend and he held Maybelle in the highest of regard. She, of all the women he had met, was class in the first degree. From her roots as a floor scrubber to the only Colored star of Baltimore tv, she gracefully took her place behind HIS podium when she should have had one herself. He had tried so many times to tell her how much he admired her strength and tenacity, but her eyebrows always raised and with a cock of her head, she would admonish him.

"Honey, life is tough for people like me. You can lick your wounds or claw to the top. Baby, I got my nails sharpened!" she would gleam.

It always made him smile and he would forget for a second that she was right. There were places in town she couldn't go, people she couldn't be seen with and rights that she didn't have, because of the color of her skin and her gender. A black woman was nothing in 1962.

On the other end of the class scale, Velma Von Tussle/ thorn in his side/pain in his ass, was escorted out by security after attempting to rig the Miss Teenage Hairspray Pageant. When he thought about it, he giggled. Damn straight, giggled like a little girl. The look of that overbearing, under loved, control freak being lead screaming from the studio was the peach in his pie. He loved the thought of it, and smiled as he tried to photographically memorize the mascara streaming down her face, her perfect hair deflating to strings as she screamed for a lawyer and bellowed that she would sue. As she was pushed out the door, her spawn followed behind her. Amber.

Lord, how that girl made life hell for everyone on the show. But at the moment she shuffled out of the studio, eyes to the ground, broken and beaten, he had actually felt sorry for her. She had remained self-righteous and indignant to the second that Inez's name was called. Although incredulous and amazed, she handled it with more grace than befit her age or personality for that matter. He overheard her tell her SheDevil mother that they should deal with it. He was taken aback. Yet, when it was all over, she didn't yell, scream or holler (unlike her mother). She just turned away, looking as if she decided to blend into the wall, never to be seen again. It was pitiful. He hoped to talk to her. Just a little comfort and an atta girl, but she hadn't been seen in a few days. Rumor had it that she was still in school, although a quieter more subdued mirror of her former self.. Who knows, maybe she was plotting to blow up the studio. One could expect fireworks from the Von Tussle family.

But something about the whole situation, gave Corny pause. The girl really never bothered him, short of the pouts and tantrums. In some ways, she stayed in the three year old stage. But he could see her mother never let her mature. A dose of guilty sympathy washed over him. Greed, power and manipulation kept her in her place. Their eyes had met for a second as she left, but he was too caught up in greedy excitement to go to her. Perhaps he should have, just perhaps.

Now. Mr. Spritzer! He was so shocked by the whole situation, he nearly blew a clot. The man hyperventilated in the booth and Corny put a bag over his face telling him to breathe, just breathe. Spritzer credited him with saving his life and saving the show! Corny

gave the man a huge, million dollar grin and thought, "How can this lamebrain be running a company?" However, dealing with a person this dense, could become a golden opportunity. For the first time, Corny could bring a creative side to the show. Slip in the popular and edgy music. Let the kids dance as they felt, not constantly choreographed from beginning to end. That guy in Philadelphia did it. And they ran nationally. If American Bandstand could let the kids rock and roll, so could the Corny Collins Show.

The thoughts tickled his mind when he looked at the clock. Aw hell, he would have to skip the shower and pull a comb through the Brillcream to make the studio on time. His eyes swept across the room as he grabbed his suitcoat. There were huge plans brewing for the Corny Collins Show. Yet, he only knew the half of it.

2. Chapter 2

Chapter two

Amber slipped from under the covers and padded to her bath. Life had taken a turn that she never thought would happen. A week ago, her visions of playing Kim in the film version of "Bye Bye Birdie", or at least the role in the Touring Company had been set in stone. With her charm and grace, she would wow them and considering her experience in television, minor roles on the Dick Van Dyke show and Ben Casey would lead to starring roles before Amber could bat an eye. It was all there, then suddenly gone.

Yet, a bit of relief was locked in the back of her mind. Her mother made her what she was. A dancer, a diva, a star. Truth be told, she was none of this and she knew it. She had known it for a while but couldn't get out of the persona her mother demanded. In school, her grades were considered exceptional and not though the workings of her mother but from her own ability. The one thing Velma never worried about was the appearance that her daughter was not only charming and talented but also brilliant. While Velma thought that Amber charmed her way to good grades, Amber herself never studied. The workings of advanced mathematics and college level science came to her naturally. Even the meteorology class that her mother scoffed at, telling her that ladies needed home economics not weather classes to snatch a husband, was interesting and easy. Yet, the "Egghead" label always tittered around her mind. She would intentionally skip or fudge answers so as not look more intelligent than her male counterparts. Afterall, no man would want to marry someone smarter than him and she would coo and goo over the boys who got the simplest answers correct. Bah! She knew that this was what was expected of her. The demure little lady who couldn't think her way out of a paper bag, waiting to be saved by that big strong man was the ideal of a 50's woman.

But it was no longer the 50's. Something about the whole situation didn't seem right. Why was it that her mother, an intelligent woman in her own right, could only become a manager if she spread her legs to powerful men? Why couldn't a woman be smart and make it in the world? Why did we have to cake ourselves with make-up, walk the streets in stiletto heels and look like cupcakes to get noticed? Why did we hide what we were?

So as she began to search for the liquid eyeliner in the drawer full of make-up and make a mental note about getting to the beauty shop to

wash and release her hair, she pondered where her life would go.

3. Chapter 3

Chapter three

The phone was ringing at the studio as well when Corny strutted in. Mr. Spritzer talked quickly and laughed uncontrollably between calls seemingly silent behind the glass of the control booth. While the kids danced, both black and white, negotiations were going on behind the scenes.

Corny saw Maybelle smiling behind the podium. These were her boys, her girls, showing the other teens how to shake and shimmy the way her people had been doing for years. From the ragtime of the early part of the century to the budding Motown sound, the music of the negro world was the soundtrack that moved the community. Bold and innovative, these young bodies naturally moved to the beat in a different way than their Caucasian counterparts. Black hands sliding down the waists of young white girls and black girls leaning their bodies against white boys trying to synchronize the moves, was still taboo, yet was going on right in front of her eyes. She beamed with pride.

"This is the way it should be, huh Miss Maybelle." Corny sighed as he put a hand on her shoulder.

"Yes Sir, Mr. C, they sure do look mighty fine."

"What's going on back in the booth? Spitzer looks like he's going to burst."

"Truth be told, I only heard part of the commotion going on there. Seems stations all up the East Coast are looking to carry the show. Without Mrs. Von Tussle here, the work falls on his shoulders. He's looking more serious than my Pastor on Sunday."

Corny pondered this for a moment. Up and down the East Coast. That would be Boston and Hartford, Portland and Wilmington, even New York. New York, Good God! They were much more open to Negro performances. Finian's Rainbow with a mixed race cast had been running on Broadway since 1960. It was a huge hit for this revival. Hellbells the Apollo had been showcasing a "Colored Review" since the thirties and even allowed patrons of color to fill the audience. Unbeknownst to Corny, those performers were only brought in because they were cheaper to pay, but in his mind, this was the world he envisioned. Black, white, red or yellow, talent was talent and he saw one big rainbow in his council.

"Maybelle, do you know what this means?." He suddenly blurted out from his own thoughts, "We're gonna rock the country. Look over there. Wait until ole Alabammie sees these kids holding hands and moving to the music. Some of those crackers are going to choke on their juleps. Can you just imagine when thoseâ€|â€|â€|"

His words fell away as he looked at Maybelle's furrowed brow.

"Lordy Mister, what are you talkin' bout?"

"The Council! No matter what the color, they'll be dancing together. It will open a new view to the county. Let them see that these kids are the same. They dance, they sing, they live and love. Maybelle, we're gonna change the world."

Maybelle dropped her eyes. "My people in the South are being lynched for less."

He drew in his breath. "But we've broken the barrier. People are calling, they want this."

Maybelle sighed, "No Mr. C. They want the kids dancing. Dancing on the same stage, not togetherâ€¦."

"Butâ€¦" Corny tried to interrupt, but Maybelle put up her hand.

"You're moving too fast, pushing too hard." She waved his words away. "A great man is leading the way for what you want. A good man, a gentle man. He has stated that we should be patient but firm. My Pastor traveled down to Georgia as part of the Albany Movement. He heard a minister named Dr. King speak there and brought his message back. Now my church, my street and my neighborhood are listening. We know that things will change for us, but in time. Not now."

Suddenly pride overcame reason for Corny. "Well Maybelle, it's still my show. If I want those kids dancing together, it will happen. People need to understand and I WILL make it happen." He yelled just a bit louder than he intended. The dancing stopped and the kids looked his way.

She chuckled softly, "You, Corny Collins have always had that bit of ego getting in the way of your brain. Let's go children, we've on in 45 minutes." She hollered out then turned back to Corny.

"You've always been on the lookout for those kids. Half of those boys would not even be on the show had you not given your suits for them to wear. The girls shoes, the boys bus money, they all knowâ€¦â€¦"

"Wait, they KNOW!" Corny interrupted, "You weren't suppose to tell them where that stuff came from."

"Honey, they are not cotton-headed baby dolls who think goodies fall from the sky." She said with a shake of her head, "I make my rent and outfit my own children. That's as far as my money goes, and they all know it. Besides, when you come to the show in a suit and the next month it turns up on a boy's doorstep all ready for his Mama's nip and tuck to fit her child, they have eyes. You couldn't think that this was a secret now did you?"

Corny flushed, why yes he did.

Maybelle could see his discomfort. "You must know that you have been able to provide more for them than even their parents could. That's their future Past the meals, past the clothes, past the transportation, you've gotten them exposure. Don't jeopardize it for your dream Corny. Take it just a step at a time. Do you see where I'm coming from?"

She saw a puzzled look stare back from his face. "Butâ€|.."

"No, no buts. Let the show progress. Let the country progress. If you throw these kids together and force the issue, we could lose it all. Do you understand? Maybe later, when those new cities open up and white folk begin to get used to seeing this, the kids will be able to mix person to person. For now, couple with couple, is more than enough. See?"

He knew she was right, although he didn't want her to be. He looked down like a child admonished and nodded

"Of course you're right." He said sadly.

"But you must know how far you've taken them already and how far we CAN go. Who knows, I may be the next Lena Horneâ€|â€|" she cocked her head back to strike a pose.

Corny smiled, "Lady, you're better than Lena could ever be."

"Mr. Collins", the makeup girl interrupted, "your chair is ready." Corny bounced off the podium. He knew how things needed to be and was ready to meet the world as they wanted to see him. Fluffed, puffed and confident, Corny Collins would take it on a step at a time.

4. Chapter 4

Chapter four

Velma was at the lawyer's office when Amber got home from school, arguing again that her contract held nothing which negated it for rigging a contest. She was rightly the Station Manager and would own WYZZ if they did not take her back. As always, she saw nothing wrong with what she had done, but the station saw it differently. The stockholders wanted her gone and eventually would settle for a hefty amount to buy her out. Sometimes when Velma lost, she really won.

Amber watched the show day after day. They all smiled and were happy. In some ways, so was she. No more hours of practice, cramped calves and corns. What a relief! She could see the slight stumbles of the girls as they stepped on their blisters or smiled through the pain of a shin splint. It made her snort. Good for them, they were horrid anyway. Who needs that?

She saw Tyrone, the kind boy who tried to teach her the steps he performed at the end of the contest. He didn't look down when their eyes met, nor did he ignore the gentle pleading of her face. He strode over and smiled. Funny how she had never given a second glance to those Negro boys. Her mother always said they were well beneath her. But why? Because their skin was dark? They sure danced better than the white boys, smooth and sleek. What was it about the colored people that made them less than us? She concluded it wasn't them, it was us. Like her mother, white people had to put others down to feel good about themselves. Corny was right all along, the show looked better with a mixed council.

Corny.

She studied his million dollar smile as he swayed to the beat in front of the top 10 board. She was suppose to hate him because her mother did. But now everything was turned upside down. She studied his face, his hands, the way he moved and remembered the secret mad crush she told no one of. The way a student loves her teacher, she had adored that man. Breathless when he brushed by her, sighing when she pushed in to his camera shot, it was her secret and only hers. Now she was like every other girl,, watching him move only through the tv screen. She would never smell that musky fragrance his suit took on after a time in the lights or feel the firm arm around her waist that made her knees go weak. All that was gone forever.

He stood in the backround while Link sang to Tracy, a deep love song he had practiced for her. Somehow, that made her giggle too. Poor Link, thinking she was as loose as her mother, he pushed past second base only to have her resist just in time. The rumors were just not true. She didn't have to sleep her way to the top; her mother did that for her. It was a control issue. She refused to give any of those boys the prize only to brag that they got it. She used her sex appeal differently than Mother, she was a tease and she loved it. It meant she won. Hearing the "Ice Princess" rumors from the boys and the "Unbridled Whore" rumors from the girls, sometimes made her revel in her own ability to control her situation. She could use what she had, the way SHE wanted to.

"Welcome to our new viewers from Boston and Washington D.C. to the Corny Collins family!!" Corny's words interrupted her thoughts. "Tune in everyday for the hottest dance moves around."

Wow, two weeks and syndication in five cities. Amber felt a twinge of jealousy, but quickly pushed it aside. She needed to be able to walk into that studio; head held high and collect her belongings from her vanity and storage area. She was thinking about her high school graduation coming up and wearing that white dress trimmed in pink, but it was left behind. She needed to go there, but did not need to meet up with the Council. Okay, so maybe late would be better. The Council Members were out by 6:00pm, off to do homework and eat dinner with their families. The News anchors began around the same time. Everyone would be too busy to notice the small blonde sneaking into the dressing rooms. No prodding or poking about where she had been or what she was doing. It sure would be easier that way. Amber pondered this as she poured a cup of hot water and dropped in a tea bag. She began to stir it as her eyes moved to the kitchen table. A newspaper crossword puzzle lay half finished under a dirty coffee cup

Amber smiled, "Time to look for that job I'm not qualified for.".

A flip to the classified and a quick scan of the ads. Nurses, machine operators, truck drivers, typists, all out. Amber sighed, why didn't she take typing or Dictaphone? Oh that's right, she was going to be a star. Thanks Mother. If she hadn't done her little magic, Amber would be getting council money right now. Suddenly, something caught her eye.

"WBAL seeks the employment of an experienced television woman to fill the position of weekend weathergirl"

Amber scanned down the ad. She could do this. She smiled as she remembered Mr. Jenkins, the High School Science teacher pulling her

aside after her meteorology final.

"You are missing your calling Amber. You should consider being a Weathergirl."

Funny how he never suggested she actually study meteorology in college, girls were too stupid for the Sciences, but because she had a pretty face and understood how high pressure and low pressure made the clouds move, she would be perfect to smile and point at the magnetic "L" or "H" on the board behind her. Nice.

Amber heard the end theme song begin and rushed back to the living room to get a final glimpse of Corny with kinescope credits running over his face. She couldn't think about him now. She had to time things just right. She slipped the hot liquid in her cup and put it down on the coffee table. Sometimes in life, timing was everything.

5. Chapter 5

Chapter five

Amber watched from across the street for the last of the Council Members to leave the building. She gave it another few minutes before she decided it was safe to go in.

"Good evening Earl," she said politely to the watchman at the desk, "I'm here to retrieve my belongings."

The guard squinted at her. "Now, Miss Von Tussle, you aren't here to make trouble are you?"

"Please call me Amber, and no. No trouble, just my things."

"Well, Miss, er Amber, I'm not sure that I can let you onto station property all by yourself." Earl cleared his throat, visibly uncomfortable with allowing her to continue but unsure how to tactfully tell her to leave. "Maybe it would be a better idea for you to come back in the afternoon, when Randy is here with me. He could take you to the soundstage and get you back here just fine."

"Earl, I'm still in school. I can't come back in the afternoon." She began to get flustered and nearly screamed at him, but something held her back. She just didn't have the confidence anymore, "Please. I came all this way. Please can't I just go up and get what I need."

"No Miss, not without an escort. Now you just come on back at 4:00 tomorrowâ€¦"

"I'll escort her Earl. I'll be responsible for her actions."

Suddenly her knees went weak at the sound of his voice. She lifted a gloved hand to the desk and steadied herself. Her eyes lowered, her head turned, then her lashes lifted to gaze into the azure blue eyes of Corny Collins.

"Okay, Mr. Collins" Earl replied, "If you want to take her, I would

feel a whole lot better about the situation."

"No problem, my friend." Corny flashed that smile at Earl, "I'll keep her under close supervision."

"Thank you." She whispered and began to move as fast as her feet would carry her. It wasn't far to the dressing room and the monitor above Earl's head chimed out the familiar theme song of the 6:00 News. No one would be in the dressing rooms, no one in the hallways. Just her. And, of course, the man who made butterflies flip in her stomach, who on a normal basis, she would have been happy to be in a room alone with. Oh God, why couldn't things go right for her anymore?

"Amber, what's your hurry?" Corny started breathlessly, as he fought to catch up with her. "Come on, we haven't seen you. How are you doing? What are you doing? How's your mother?"

She stopped and looked at him coolly. "Fine, we're just fine. I need to get my dresses Corny and I need to do it now."

He shrugged as he quickened his pace to match hers. It seemed like she didn't want to answer any questions and he wasn't pressing the issue. She needed her stuff and he needed to take her. Maybe belaying a little guilt in the process. She walked in and was taken aback by the vanity table. It used to be hers, with fresh flowers everyday and good luck charms hanging from the lights. Now Inez had made it her own. Amber stood shocked for a moment, then brushed her hand in the air as if to wish it away. She looked around aimlessly and finally turned to him.

His mouth was open to explain. It wasn't that she was replaced, well no, actually she was but the vanity down at the end—

"Could you please tell me where my belongings are?" her normally bright eyes with so much fire were dull as she asked.

"Um, here." He went to the wardrobe that held so many dresses and pulled a box out. Her name was on it with careful lettering. "Maybelle insisted Inez pack for you in case you would want to come back. I saw her, she tried to be as careful as she could." He paused, "Are you coming back Amber? There is a place for you, you know."

"Oh no." she sighed, "there was never really a place for me here. Just a place for the girl my mother wanted me to be. And I never quite made that, did I?" She lifted the dresses off the rack and swooped them to the garment bag she laid on the table nearby. A quick zip and they were ready to go.

"Where are you going next?" he asked as he lifted the bag, threw it over his shoulder and moved toward the door, "On to college?"

She looked at him. He didn't look like he was making fun of her or smirking at her situation. Had she just always imagined he was a handsome jerk who stepped on people's feelings? Or did her mother tell her that. Believing it was an honest question, she gave him an honest answer.

"I don't have any money for college. Mother and I spent all that we had on clothes and manicures," she stated honestly, "It was actually

as much my fault as hers."

"Are you kidding? Your mother was required by LAW to put part of your money away. It's the Jackie Coogan law dating back to the time of silent movies. It's explained in the papers we give parents of Council members. If she didn't do that, you could sue her!" His eyes were wide.

She snorted, "Oh yeah, sue my mother. She is in as bad of shape as I am. I'd get some cheap jewelry and maybe a car. I don't have the time for that, I need to get a job."

"Where? What can you do Amber? Not too many places will let you dance for your supper." He instantly regretted saying it. He was angry at her mother not her, but it didn't come out that way, "Really Amber, come back to the Council. I'll make sure your pay comes to you."

She rolled her eyes. How could she explain it? It would be easy to waltz back in, protected by this man from the other Council Members. After the summer, when the current members were tossed because they were no longer in High School, she would have enough to cover her first classes, but at what cost? Her pride took over and she realized that this was not an option. Suddenly the want ads came to mind.

"Actually Corny, I'm going tomorrow to apply for the Weathergirl position at WBAL. I've done enough television to know how it works. I think I'd be good at the job."

He narrowed his eyes and studied her as they walked. She was serious. He let it mull in his mind, then smiled. "I think you might be fantastic at that Amber. I wish you all the best."

She concluded that the words were genuine and his smile melted her heart. Tears welled up in her eyes. "Um, yeah, I hope so." She paused to take the garment bag from him, all the while avoiding those eyes. "Thank you for helping with this but I think I can handle it now."

She started for the revolving door at the front, yet her feet would not move. "Congratulations on your syndication Corny. The show deserves to be seen by other cities. I hope you go far." She looked up to see him grinning again. She wanted to grab him and get lost in his embrace. She was longing for the comfort that she felt he could give and was willing to give him anything he wanted for it. She pushed the thought away. She was still a teenager and he was still a star. No sense in looking for it here.

"Yeah, and the same to you Amber. Keep your chin up and just keep moving forward. You'll do fine."

She made it out the door, box under her arm and garment bag covering her silhouette. She was glad it hid her completely so he couldn't see her shoulders begin to shudder while holding back tears. She made it to her car before the moan from pit of her soul was allowed to come forth. And with it, escaped Amber Von Tussle the child. She would never think of herself as her mother's daughter again.

Corny strode over to the phone at the front desk after he saw her go. There was something different about her. Something older, deeper, the

kind of thing that if he were a different man, would make him pursue her just to get a taste. But not him, not Corny Collins. Instead he looked to Earl.

"Dern pity isn't it Mr. Collins" Earl said, "she could be such a nice girl."

"Yeah, oh Earlâ€¦".Corny began pulling his mind back to the task at hand, "how do I get an outside line on this phone. Dial 9?"

"Yes, sir." Earl replied.

Corny knew how Baltimore television worked. One must know someone to get anywhere and a drink after work with a slap on the back could get a person far in the city. Corny played it right, in case Velma ever found it in her heart to give him that pink slip. He had friends in high places. Never in his wildest dreams did he believe that he would be pulling in a favor for Amber Von Tussle. Never.

He dialed the phone and heard the operator chime, "WBAL may I help you?"

"Yes, may I be connected to Chuck Thompson? Corny Collins. Yes, I'll hold."

Chuck was recently back from his stint in Washington. He may be "sports" but was big enough to have a hand in who would be picked for weather girl if he were to put in a good word. Corny needed a good word and was willing to ask for it. Who could deny the Godfather of their youngest son anyway?

"Chuck! How are ya pal?

Good, good. Glad I caught you. Hey got a big one to call in. There's a girl coming in tomorrow for the Weathergirl position. Friend of mine

No, not that kind of friend" Corny chuckled uncomfortably. "Do you think you can put in a good word for her? Yeah, Amber. Amber Von Tussle."

Corny was glad Chuck had done his time out of the city. He would not connect the name Von Tussle with the harpie that ran WXYT. He needed him not to.

And when Amber got the job, she didn't suspect that call was made. She still believed timing was everything, but never considered it to be the timing of meeting Corny Collins by the security desk that day.

6. Chapter 6

Chapter six- 1965

"You've Got Me Under Your Spell" was beginning to climb the charts. Amber sat under a tree on campus, studying her third year communications book, the first time she heard it. Young, sweet voices sang of a first crush and the magic feelings it caused. She stopped reading to listen to the words and they were lovely. Then the DJ

announced the local singers who were rocketing up the charts, "Inez and the Charmettes". INEZ! How many girls in Baltimore could be named Inez?

Amber had not tuned into the Corny Collins Show in quite a while. The year after she landed the job at WBET, a new book was released by Betty Friedan, "The Feminine Mystique". Quite controversial, the book criticized the idea that women could only find fulfillment through childbearing and homemaking. Amber ate it up. A woman could be all that she wanted to be. Whether a Scientist, a Doctor or a bricklayer, a woman could do it. And Amber felt that it was almost written for her. She was too much into furthering her own career and education to look at the fluff that used to be her life. Yet today, her curiosity was peaked. She had to catch a glimpse of that show.

Her contract stated that she must be in the studio for make-up at 5:00. Today, Amber would arrive early. She could catch the last half of the show on a television in the control booth She had to see if Inez of the Charmettes was that little girl who took her place three years ago..

She raced across the campus to her aging car. It had been new when she turned 16, and was so darling back then. Now, six years later, it showed age, sometimes sputtering when it started. She silently prayed that this time it would start without a hitch. She backed out of her spot and whizzed down to the WBET studio.

Amber stared up at the monitors which ran all the stations in the Baltimore area. She never quite understood the reason for keeping an eye on the competition but she often watched to see how the other anchors handled their jobs. She learned a bit of flash, even in front of the weather board, could bring in the ratings numbers. She had gotten the idea for a bright sunshine and frowny face clouds to add to her board. The skier and bathing beauty were added this year. The audience loved it and she soon moved from the morning broadcast to the afternoon and evening forecasts. Rumor was that they were considering her to actually anchor the midday report. Unknown for a woman, her newfound feminism took the management aback. However, they saw that she was a moneymaker with the housewives. She looked innocent but was a strong young woman who spoke to the bored wifey waiting for hubby to come home, The happy weather girl took the spotlight doing entertainment interviews during the morning show and she became the most popular face in the city. Amber Von Tussle was shooting like an arrow through Baltimore tv. And unlike her mother she did it on her own terms.

But now she stood staring at the monitor watching young bodies move to the beat. It brought a wash of memories. She was able to push them out of her mind until the song ended. Suddenly, Corny's face flashed on the screen,

"That was 'My Girl' by the Temptations! Another hot hit from Motown Records. Now don't touch that dial, coming up, our own Inez and the Charmettes will put you 'under their spell'. After station identification". The audience went nuts and the camera faded to black.

She wasn't quite prepared for that face in extreme close up. Damn that man could make her knees quiver. In the years since her mother married the oil man and moved on to Texas, she was on her own to do

as she pleased. A first, she took invitations to parties and dinners, but soon found that the lifestyle interfered with her studies. Or at least that's what she told herself. Too many of these occasions included the personalities from all the Baltimore stations. Many times she would look across the room to see that smile heading toward her. She was polite enough, but he didn't fit into her plans. She didn't dabble with the "womanizing man" labeled taboo by all her feminist friends. Although, deep down, she knew that he could move her like no one else and that he was far from "womanizing". And that actually made it worse. She would never be the sweet housewife, with a gaggle of kids, a white picket fence and a fluffy dog waiting for "the man" to come home. No she was woman with a capital W and didn't need any of that. Her name would be known for what she did, not who she was related to. She did that with her mother and it would never be that way again.

His voice brought her back from her thoughts, "And now the moment you've all been waiting for. Let's give a big hand for Inez and the Charmettes"

Three young girls ran out before the bleachers as the audience went wild. Amber stared. It was that little girl alright, but little no longer. Amber did a quick calculation; the kid was 12, maybe 13 when she took over, now 15 or 16. The group had pony tails and loafers, they sang like angels, moving smoothly in perfect synchronization. They were "Martha and the Vandellas" or "The Supremes" only younger, brighter and happier. Kind of like that boy group out of Gary, IN she had interviewed last week. The one with the cute baby brother that could sing up a storm. What was that name? Jackson, that's right.

Amber made a mental note to book these girls on her show. Inez and her group were star material and Amber wasn't going to miss out on an exclusive for her emotions of the past. No way. The kid may belong to WYZZ, but WBAL would get a performance out of her too, before she went national. And national she would go, Big Time. Amber was sure of it.

7. Chapter 7

**_For anyone reading, please comment.
> Tracy, thank you for the reviews! Hugs**

Chapter Seven â€" 1966

And Amber was right. Inez and the Charmettes had hit after hit under the guidance of Maybelle and her dealings with Barry Gordie. Motown grabbed them up and promoted them as the Supremes only younger. The little girls of the country, not quite teenagers, could relate to their songs of infatuation unnoticed, rather than the undying love of older groups. A niche market was found and it propelled them skyward. Motown and the Corny Collins show benefited. Inez and the girls were still Council members by contract and Corny wouldn't let her go. Maybelle, went along for loyalty's sake. She liked the weekly exposure but sure didn't like the drive to Detroit for recording session. She knew, eventually, they would move to where Inez needed to be.

The major turn of events came later that year when rumors began to

fly that Dick Clark was in talks with ABC pick up and nationally syndicate The Soul Train from Chicago. It could be biggest innovation since The Corny Collins Show integrated. But not if Corny had anything to do with it.. Suddenly, calls were being made across the country, Big calls, to executive in LA as well as Detroit. Secret calls from huge names in the business. Then suddenly the calls stopped.

The phone rang in the General Manager's office of WYZT one afternoon. After a brief conversation, the Manager furrowed his brow.

"Excuse me, Ruthie?" he called out to his secretary.

"Yes, Mr. Gunderson?"

"I'm going to need to see Corny Collins and Maybelle Stubbs in my office."

"Yes, Sir."

It didn't take long for Corny and Maybelle to be sitting in front of him. Both of them were behind the scenes. Both knew something was up. Something that could, not only change the show but also their lives as well. Forever.

Gunderson looked solemn. It wasn't like him to be grim, but the look was serious. "Corny, that was just King Features Syndicate on the phone. They have been in negotiations with NBC to carry a dance show for coloreds. They were looking at Soul Train there in Chicago."

Maybelle smiled at Corny. He had long ago helped to upgrade her status on the show to Producer. She deserved it. Now, when he needed her most, she came through. He couldn't get Motown backing, but she sure showed her worth right now. Without the Motown influence, they may not have worked this out. The Mama of Inez Stubbs could but a bug in the ear of Barry Gordie as long as his little star was pulling in livin' large cash.

"But now", Gunderson continued, "they are looking your way. NBC would like an option to run The Corny Collins show to a national audience to compete with American Bandstand, Where the Action Is and the new Colored show when it's picked up. Now understand that this is a big move for the both of you. Unlike the syndication to the east coast, NBC wants flasher sets and a new sound system. Something we just cannot do here."

Corny held his breath and said a Hail Mary, Maybelle repeated silently, "In the Name of Jesus, please watch over Your lost children"

"So," he continued, "NBC would like to pick up your contracts and move the show to LA"

They screamed and jumped into each other's arms. Hell, yeah! This is what they had been working towards. From the moment Maybelle heard that the branch office of Motown was opening up in Los Angeles and Corny got wind of the Soul Train rumor, they started to move. No way would another show snatch the black audience. No way would either of them allow it.

Gunderson looked at them with wide eyes, "I'd say it's a done deal then?"

But they never heard.

Not long after, Amber sat in her regular make-up chair.

"Here's the new fall schedule, Miss Von Tussle." Suzie said as she dropped it in her lap.

Amber was anxious to see it. Management was talking about adding a news/information show to air at 11:00am weekdays. Her popularity as a substitute on the morning show, meant that she was almost a shoe-in to host. No more bouncy weather forecasts. She was moving on to news exclusively. Oh Yeah! She picked the folder up nonchalantly and opened the front cover.

Ugh, why do these people emphasize weekend programming? Kid shows and Sports with a sprinkling of religion thrown in Sunday mornings. It never changed, always the kiddies and the men. She quickly scanned the NBC line up, 9am, Super Six, 9:30, Super President?? What was that garbage? Well Flintstones came on at 10 and Secret Squirrel at 11:30, not soâ€¦|â€¦|.

Suddenly four words jumped off the page and caused her instant vertigo. The Corny Collins Show at Noon. Her eyes grew wide. How in the world should she remain the strong dominant female with him strutting around WBAL? She would have to see him, talk to him, she couldn't avoid it. But really, didn't she want to? No, no, no, her mind screamed. She was Miss Independent. What was that new word used? A Woman's Libber! First and foremost, career woman extraordinaire. She didn't have the energy to waste on a man. Oh but those eyes and the deep richness of his voice, When he came to her in dreams and whispered to her, wasn't she a complete woman? Darkly sensual and seductive he wanted only her and moaned from the depths of his soul guiding her touch. And she needed to touchâ€¦|â€¦|. NO! Her mind argued with itself for another minute. She sighed.

Wait! There was no way. She hadn't heard anything about WBAL taking over that show. God knows, there wasn't enough money to give decent raises, let alone outbid WYZZ for CCS. She felt as if she were slipping down a deep pit, but gained her composure.

"Rebecca?" Amber quizzed the make-up girl as she brought the brushes over, "Have you heard anything about us picking up The Corny Collins Show? It's in the fall schedule for Saturdays."

"It wasn't that WE picked it up," Rebecca said as she powdered Ambers chin, "NBC picked it up. It's gone national. Didn't you hear? They moved out to the studios in Burbank last week. It will be coming live from LA when it airs in the fall."

"Well I will be damned." Amber mouthed out a breath. Geez oh pete, she could not imagine. Well little Inez sure did a number for old Corny. Made him popular beyond his wildest imagination. Amber smiled. Yeah, this was right.

"Good Luck, my darling." Amber almost prayed as she stood up from the chair, "I sure do hope Los Angeles is ready for Corny Collins."

8. Chapter 8

Chapter Eight " 1967

Los Angeles was ready for Corny Collins, but he was far from ready for her. Nor were the Council Kids. Although the offer was made for all the kids to move to California, not all the parents were happy with the idea. Picking up entire families for a job to last a couple years was not in the realm of reality. A few of the Council went along for the ride, and a ride it was. The rest of the kids were released from their contracts and went on to live normal lives. Well as normal in the late sixties would allow.

The summer of love, 1967, made California a whole different concept for Corny, Maybelle, Inez and her Charmette partners. While the Baltimore had a thread of sex, drugs and rock and roll flowing beneath the scenes, over on the Left Coast, it was in your face and unzipping your pants. Nothing, absolutely nothing could prepare them for what they were about to leap into.

The Corny Collins Show took America by storm. It had long since lost the emphasis on dance and had become a music show, showcasing local talent back home. In Los Angeles, there was no local talent. The bands that walked onto the soundstage were big, like top 100 big. Drugged up and moody, they were spoiled talent and expected to be treated as such. NBC wrapped them in kudos before they even walked in, so by the time Maybelle and Corny were dealing with them, the bands had an air of privilege not to be ignored, or else. For the first time, every week was an ass kissing session for Corny and he didn't like it. Not one bit.

When they first arrived, everyone stuck close. All of the Baltimore cast had been used to a different lifestyle. People knew them back home but that border to Southern America made people polite and distant. They would ask for autographs and snap pictures, but here, everyone demanded and were so in your face. All of the cast lost the much needed support system that kept them grounded and happy. Maybelle walked away from her neighbors and church. Corny, although superficially Catholic, did the requirements and had a home in his parish, as well as the work he did with underprivileged children in the slums of Baltimore. Now, while they could have run to the refuge of the community, it was not there. Only the toadies that lived and survived on knowing the powerful. Need a drink, right here. Need a toot, in my purse. Need a BJ, woman and men stood in line. Decadent pleasure oozed out of the very molecules of Hollywood. With no support system, the cast members grew more and more miserable. They filled the void with those things available to them.

The first to fall was Tamara, the youngest of the Charmettes. Her very trusting parents had moved with the thought that their baby was about as good as a God fearing Baptist girl could be. They brought her up right and she was singing lead Gospel in the choir when she became a Council member. She and Inez would belt out ballads walking down the hallways of school. When they talked about forming a group, she had stars in her eyes but a good strong family life taught her right from wrong. Suddenly in LA there was no right or wrong. She was sweet and innocent. Real innocent. Why would anyone steer her in the wrong direction?

Tamara didn't tell her own mother but came to Maybelle when she contracted her first sexually transmitted disease. The poor thing had no clue about what happened. The boy who took her out and showed her how beautiful the city was at night from under the Hollywood sign had made her feel so wonderful. She never knew that he made everyone feel wonderful. Boys and girls. She learned she was just one of many. The drinking came next, heavy drinking, where she could hardly stand during performances. After a party in the Hollywood Hills, she was dumped off at her parent's door, stinking of Jack Daniels and bleeding from a split lip. She began to vomit uncontrollably and her parents rushed her to the emergency room. There it was discovered that syphilis was destroying her young reproductive system. Years later, she would have a terrible time conceiving and then would lose her uterus soon after her second baby was born.

Next Charisse, the other Charmette was wilder and totally unsupervised in Los Angeles. Her mother had died years before, giving birth to her baby sister. Her father, a dock worker, had a big heart but had problems raising his six children alone. By the time Charisse joined The Corny Collins Show, she had already been the main caregiver for her siblings, had seen much of life in the slums of Baltimore and around the docks. When she got the opportunity to move with the show, her father tearfully kissed her goodbye wishing her best of luck. Although, she got into the party scene immediately, she was still a professional and showed up for work dressed and shining. No one suspected what she was going or who she was hanging with. She even showed up faithfully every week at the big Sunday dinner Maybelle spread out for her loved ones. But one night a call came in to the Stubbs residence that turned it all upside down. Charisse had been at a cabaret downtown. She traveled onto the roof with some of partygoers. They had already dropped acid and were smoking some weed when one of the girls looked in her purse for a small vial of cocaine. It was missing and accused another girl of stealing it. A fight ensued. The women rolled around punching and pulling hair. Some people laughed, some yelled. Charisse and her boyfriend tried to break it up. Suddenly, one of the fighting women, got to her purse pulled out a small revolver. Before anyone knew it, three people were shot, including Charisse. Maybelle rushed to the hospital, only to see the poor girl hooked up to monitors and tubes everywhere. The doctors pulled Maybelle aside and told her that the bullet had entered Charisse's brainstem and exited through her forehead. She would never recover. Maybelle placed a call to her father. A scream of shock and grief came through the phone. He was too distraught to make any decisions. Maybelle called her Pastor back in Baltimore, begging for help. Together they knew that there was no reason to keep her body alive. Maybelle and Inez held her hand as the respirator was turned off and Charisse took her last breath.

A huge funeral was held for her. Stars shuffled past her casket, crying, and throwing flowers at her feet. Including the Motown higher-ups. With the death of Charisse, their music was hot property but the group was no longer the same. This would be a turning point for The Charmettes with no way to turn toward a good conclusion. It would be a turning point for everyone.

Corny sat alone at the funeral parlor after everyone left. What in the world happened here? Why had this young life been taken? Guilt washed over him. Baltimore had been a safe haven for all of them. Now what did they have, steaming hot weather, shallow friends and bad

influences. The decision to move the show national was his, and he regretted it more than anyone could imagine. He had no clue who he was anymore. At one time, he was secure in the knowledge that he was a good man who showed young people an example parents were pleased with and adults envied. Now he was surrounded by women used their bodies for his cash and the status he held. Flamboyant, narcissistic men who flaunted and preened, defining themselves by their sexual lifestyle. Along with the kiss asses who followed him around to get a taste of his stardom. He dabbled in all of it and found it lacking. He felt like a shell of his former self, taken in by his own sloth and the Hollywood lifestyle.

He had tried to talk to Maybelle about his feelings but she was caught too much in her love of The Lord to hear any depressed thoughts.

"God has a bigger plan for all of us Mr. C." she said through her tears, "He loves us and will bring us to where we need to be. Charisse is in a better place and one day, Our Lord will bring us all out of this valley of tears."

The valley of tears was exactly where he was. She spoke about God and at that moment he was sure there was no God. How could there be a God to take this young, sweet girl away? How could there be a God who let him feel the way he was feeling now? God, HA! He was a figment of people's imagination. Corny knew it now and felt foolish for all the rituals he had participated in. No more, no way.

Suddenly, he was overwhelmed with a need to escape. He couldn't be here anymore, he couldn't smile through another show. His contract with NBC was renegotiated but never signed. Out of respect for Charisse, the show had been cancelled this week and Corny was to sign the new three year contract when they returned. He just didn't care anymore. He needed to go and the show was the cause of his angst. He stood, resolved as to what he needed to do.

The jaguar roared to a stop in front of Corny's building. The doorman greeted him with his usual smile. For the first time, Corny ignored him. The elevator seemed to take forever as it lifted to the penthouse. He threw the penthouse door open and made his way to the study. He stared down at the pricey stationery with the large capital "C"s embossed onto the corner, when he heard a noise behind him. He felt well manicured fingers begin to rub his shoulders and turned to see the pink baby doll pjs leaning into him with large surgically enhanced breasts spilling out the top.

"Corny." She whined, "Come to bed, I'm lonely."

Ugh, how had he ever thought that this Barbie Doll was desirable. "Not now Bunny," He snapped, "I'm busy."

"But," she cooed, "Bunny needs her Corny-worny to make her all fuzzy-wuzzy."

He used to think that baby talk was just adorable, now he looked at her in disgust. He pushed her away, "NOT NOW I said!!"

"Fine, Asshole!" she screamed in her adult voice. "Sleep alone tonight."

Right. That's fine with him. He turned back to the stationery and quickly scrolled out a letter to NBC. Because of artistic differences he would not be in to sign the new contract. Thank you so much for the opportunity, blah, blah, blah. He addressed and sealed the envelope, tossing it to the side.

He stared at the paper. He had to tell Maybelle that he was leaving. This was much harder. He loved that woman. She was the anchor that held him as grounded as he could be. She deserved more than a flippant kiss good-bye. He picked up the pen and began to pour out his heart.

"My Dearest Miss Maybelle,

Life is like a book. Sometimes you turn a page and you move on with the story. Sometimes, it's a whole new chapter. I need a new chapterâ€¦|.."

He told her how much he admired her and how wonderful she had always been. She was a great lady and could do anything that she set her mind to, color or gender be damned. Tears began to cloud his eyes and fall silently onto the paper as he continued.

"I will always love you. You have been my best friend and cheerleader for so long. But now I need to find the person that you think I am. I lost him long ago.

Take care, my dearest friend and always know that I love you. Keep Inez safe. Hug her, kiss her and keep her close. She is a fine young woman, just like her mother.

Love always,

Corny"

He sealed the envelope and headed off to the 24 hour airport Post Office. As he filled out the Certified mail cards, a thought came to his mind. He felt good for the first time in a long time. He was going to leave and become a whole person again. He drove into the night until he could see the lights of Las Vegas glowing in the distance. The jag purred to a stop. He took a deep breath and began to walk towards the lights.

And he was never heard from again.

9. Chapter 9

Chapter Nine-1982

Amber sat in her office at "SuperStation WYZT". The wheeling and dealing that went on with the Satellite operators had drained her. Now they were seen all across the country. WYZT's programming had been a diamond in the rough. They weren't huge like WOR or WGN, but were much less expensive to air because of it. Old movies and classic tv really didn't cost much and were wildly popular as the hippies of the 60's became parents of the 80's. They grasped at normalcy and it was presented before them from her station. She had long since left WBAL to take over the Management of WYZT. After her third Emmy award for the morning show and her roles in producing information reports

on the drug scene and the disco era, she was ready to move behind the scenes. Being an independent station meant more creativity, without a network breathing down her throat. With trite like "BJ and the Bear" and "CHiPs" running on that network, Amber could no longer take it. Here at WYZZ, she showed her true colors and took the station to new heights.

She looked around her office. "Broadcasting's Woman of the Year Award", Emmy, Emmy, Emmy, Golden Globe, Emmy, Peabody, Peabody. She sure was well recognized. She worked hard for it too. From her humble beginnings (okay, not so humble) as Miss Teenage Hairspray to the top of the heap in television, she clawed her way, all the way. She knew what she wanted and got what she wanted with wit, charm and brains. The one thing her mother, now demented and drooling in the nursing home Amber paid a hefty amount for, never learned was the old saying that one gets more flies with honey than vinegar. Amber learned early to make many friends, treat the little people like your best buddies and don't step on anyone as you move up the ladder. One never knows who has connections one would never suspect.

But yet, at 38, this youngest women in Broadcast history to take a station to number one in its market, felt empty. Other women had done it all. Other women married and had babies that were raised by high paid Au Pairs. Not Amber. She resolved one day during a bra burning protest that women were useless when breeders. One could only give 100 to one thing and those women who tried to give 100 to a career and 100 to family life, gypped something. After the sodden family she had, career was in the future for Amber Von Tussle, not snot nosed kids.

Yet, men were always around her. At first, she resisted them, thinking that they were shallow creatures who craved only sex. She gave in and stated relationships with a few. She soon discovered that they were actually shallow creatures who craved sex AND money. Not a single man she dated or lived with could handle the idea that she was attractive, but also intelligent and made a good living. She found them all to be leaches or too macho for her taste. The night that her lover, Jerry, blacken her eye after a tiff concerning his lack of ability to keep a job, she had enough. She kicked the bugger to the curb, got a puppy and was done with men.

Now she watched her friends with secret envy as they drove their kids to soccer games or got phone calls from the schools. Amber didn't know if she could even be a good mother. Her own had been such a winner. After years of therapy, Amber was resolved that her mother was just that, her mother. Smashing egos to make herself feel good was her way of life. The woman lived on amphetamines and cigarettes through the 50's and 60's then cocaine through the 70's. Proudly anorexic and secretly bulimic Velma had held the façade of the perfect woman. That is until the day that her circulatory system gave out. Her husband Beau was on a trip and she lay on the bathroom floor for twelve hours, denying her brain of oxygen for the entire length of time. When he found her, the damage was already done. She was a 59 year old woman in a permanent vegetative state. She breathed, she ate, she pooped and not much more. Beau called Amber to collect her and show his divorce papers. Velma was not beautiful or convenient anymore. Now Amber visited her once a week to babble at her empty eyes and she is totally dependent on the black nurses aids who care for her. Not a small bit of irony for the biggest bigot in Baltimore!

Amber's thoughts drifted to where they always did in these times of reflect. To the blue eyes that stared at her from across the room at so many Baltimore television parties. The wide smile and deep voice that always preceded the shiver that ran up her spine before she found the words to answer him. Corny Collins haunted her mind. She wasn't sure anymore whether it was the actual man that she was so enamored with, or what her dreams had made him. Just when she thought she had forgotten him, he would appear to her at night, smother her with passionate kisses in places that more selfish lovers forgot then wrap her in his arms.

"I love you Amber." He would whisper, "I'll never forget you."

But then she would wake up.

She doodled on a pad, making hearts and circles when her phone rang. A quick glance at the calendar and she knew that whoever it was, this was not a scheduled appointment. She hit the speaker button.

"Yes." She sighed.

"Ms. Von Tussle, there is someone here to see you." Millie replied.

"I don't see an appointment?" she asked puzzled.

"No, she has no appointment. She said that she is an old friend of yours." There was a pause. "She says to tell you that her name is Inez Stubbs-Franklin"

Amber nearly dropped the phone.

10. Chapter 10

Chapter Ten

"Send her in Millie." Amber said, trying to hold a composure that she didn't feel.

The door opened and a stately woman walked in. Her face was the same with an updo of braids Amber had seen on so many fine black women, and a colorful scarf wrapped around her head. She was in an African dress and carried it with pride. Amber would have known her anywhere.

"Come in Mrs. Franklin." Amber began with a swish of her hand, "Please have a seat. May I get you something? Tea or coffee?"

A large smile spread across her dark face. "Now, Ms. Von Tussle you don't have to be so formal with me. We're old friends." Inez stated genuinely, "Besides, look what you have done and I'm just a simple Sunday School teacher from the other side of town."

A simple Sunday School teacher? Well, maybe she taught, but Amber knew the money and connections of the Stubbs family. In the African-American community, they were the First Family of Baltimore.

After the death of Charisse, Motown stated that Inez and the Charmettes had lost some of their popularity. Barry Gordie, unbeknownst to the Stubbs, had plans for the group. The name Charmettes, still belonged to Motown. He felt that there was no need to keep a millstone connected to it. They paid off Inez's contract and replaced the singers with new fresh faces. The unlike The Supremes which turned into Diana Ross and the Supremes, Inez and the Charmettes became simply The Charmettes and he bet that the group would continue on with hit after hit, even without it's star.

But he bet wrong. The young girls who bought their records, were devastated by the death of one of their stars. The new girls were marketed as young sexy versions of the Supremes and fell quickly this way. About the time that the former Corny Collins show, which morphed into "Music America", was cancelled by NBC, the Charmettes released their last single that barely made it up the Top 100. They faded quietly.

All the while, Inez sat in her room and cried. She had lost her friend and her dreams all at once. Maybelle, however was thrilled. Her baby was hurt and all she wanted to do was go home. When she got the check from Motown, she packed up the few belongings they had brought with them. All the other stuff held memories of the heartache they had gone through and this devil was not coming back with them. They left Hollywood with heads held high as they drove back home. Maybelle spoke years later of how sad she had been that she couldn't bring everyone back with her. She also left a dear friend behind and he was no where to be found.

Baltimore opened her arms to the returning Stubbs. In the west, performers were dying from the choices they made. Here in Baltimore, Charisse's death was not one of many, it was personal. She was one of their own and so was Inez. Inez was greeted as a child coming home. People threw parties, the mayor invited her to the mansion and children stopped her in the streets. It didn't take her long to realize, home is where she belonged.

Maybelle had left her record store under the management of her sister. It did just fine. In fact, with the money sent from California, her sister invested in three more stores. They were growing. Around the mid-seventies, the BetaMax, home video recorder was released to the public. The generic VHS was released not long after. Maybelle saw a market and began to carry rentable movies at her stores. "Maybelle's Movies" popped up like weeds all over the city. By the time she sold her franchise to Blockbuster, she was worth millions.

Inez started into college a bit unsure of what to expect. Maybelle encouraged her to attend Sojourner-Douglass College with its Afro-Centric curriculum. She studied hard and was a popular girl. She met a young man named Isaiah Franklin and they fell in love. After they were married, both of them worked in her mother's stores while Isaiah became a Neurosurgeon and Inez raised their four children. Ironically, the youngest girl was named Amber. A name Inez always loved. People wondered why.

Now Inez sat in the office of her baby's namesake and smiled at her with a warm grin. Amber didn't know what to say next. Inez's words flowed with warmth. "I would like to talk to you about a little project I would like to finance, Ms Von Tussle."

"Amber." She said stunned.

"Yes, Amber, thank you." She continued without missing a beat, "As you know, my mother and I were recently interviewed by BET. We were asked about The Corny Collins Show. We were approached about participating in a reunion show with original Council members."

Amber's heart jumped. "Would your mother be willing to go along with this?"

"I'm not sure if you know it, but my mother has recently discovered that her bout with breast cancer is not over. She has resumed her chemotherapy and is currently hospitalized."

"I'm so sorry." Amber said sincerely.

"So am I." she replied simply. "My mother's wish is that your station runs the reunion. This station was home for her. In many ways, WYZT gave her so many good memories, she thinks that giving you the reunion would do well for all of us. There is an interest in the African American community about the show, but she wants everyone to remember with her. It was a groundbreaker. What good would it do for BET to run it with a black audience in mind? Now since you are seen on cable all across the country, black and white audiences would see it. Just like it originally aired. Mama and I would be willing to get you any amount that you would need for this to happen"

Amber's mind began to race, To have a reunion of the Corny Collins Show, one must have Corny Collins. She swallowed hard. "Has anyone spoken to Corny about this?" she managed to blurt out sounding as professional as possible.

Inez sighed. "Do you know where he is?"

Amber had no clue. She knew he disappeared from the public eye only a year after the huge success of the show on NBC. She knew that publicly, he was a ghost but thought that those he loved knew of his whereabouts all along. She was shocked and whispered a "No."

"Well that's a problem now, isn't it?" Inez replied. "The retrospect would be so much better with him there." She leaned on Amber's desk. "With the exposure that you could give us and enough cash to bring in the professionals, maybe Corny Collins can be found. What do you think?"

Amber wanted to jump up and scream, "YES!" but remained professional. "Inez, this sounds like it could work for all of us. I'm with you on it."

"Good!" Inez smiled, "This Sunday, we were planning a get together for Mama coming home from her hospital stay. My whole family will be there. We would be pleased if you would join us."

Amber agreed and offered her hand. Inez looked down and gently embraced her instead. "Welcome back to the family, Amber. You always belonged with us."

Amber plopped into her chair to steady her bubbling excitement.

Sunday would be the beginning of an adventure so big, she could not even imagine.

11. Chapter 11

Chapter Eleven

Amber didn't want to seem pretentious for this dinner. Yet, her closet revealed silks and linens. Her drawers, sweatpants and workout clothes. She worked and worked out, that was her life. The new romantic fashions seemed very young for her, but they were pretty and light. She picked a sundress with a jacket off the rack and was good to go.

She followed the directions that Inez had given to Millie before she left. It wasn't hard. She expected to be driving into one of the higher priced suburbs but found herself in the Mt. Vernon section of Baltimore. Wonderfully artsy and eclectic, it seemed the last place to find a strong Baptist family. However, if Amber knew Maybelle as she did, her home here was to assist the downtrodden. The part of society people looked away from. While surrounded by museums and historical sites, Amber was sure Maybelle was here for a reason. She just didn't know what.

The house was beautiful and held a historic marker that Amber noticed immediately. She rang the bell. A small carmel colored child with green eyes arrived at the door. She stared at Amber.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

That face. She knew that face. It was sweet and smiling the last time she saw it. Where was that? Why couldn't she place it?

"I think I'm here to see your Grandmother." Amber struggled, "Is she available?"

"GRAMMY!" the tot yelled. She couldn't have been more than three but her voice echoed in the hallway. She let the door swing as she ran off. Amber peeped inside.

"May, I told you not to leave Grandmay's door open. The air conditioning is on. Do you want to cool the whole outdoorsâ€|â€|." Amber heard the voice coming down the hall. That wasn't Maybelle. Maybe she was at the wrong house.

As the door started to slam closed Amber called out, "Excuse me."

A blonde head peered out from behind it. THAT was the face. Amber had seen her often hanging with Tracy at the studio. What was that girl's name?

"Oh Amber! I'm sorry May didn't mention you were here. We've been expecting you. Come on in." she said as she stepped back.

Amber opened the screen door and stepped in, still puzzling about the tall blonde woman. She was normally pretty good with names but was going back twenty years.

The woman saw her quizzical face. "I bet you don't remember me. Don't

let it bother you. I'm Penny. Tracy Turnblad's friend?" she said with a smile.

"Yes, Penny I do remember you. How nice to see you again." Amber wondered how many of the "Nicest Kids in Town" were invited to this party.

"And you Amber. Grandmay will be so glad to see you." She stated with an unusual grace that Amber would have not attributed to the airheaded blonde she knew years ago. Well, we all grow up. Out of breath, she small girl ran back up and grabbed Penny's hand.

"Grammy, Momma wants you to come help with the sauce. Come quick."

Amber tried to digest all of this. Grammy, Grandmay, Momma. All of this just didn't make much sense.

"Grammy?" she gave Penny an odd look.

"Yeah, she calls me Grammy," Penny laughed, "Grandmother is a mouthful for a three-year-old."

GRANDMOTHER?!? Amber was still attempting to sort it out. "You're a really young Grandmother." She heard escape her lips then was appalled with her own words.

Penny smiled, "I was an awfully young mom too." They turned a corner, "Here you are. Everyone, Amber's here."

Amber's eyes widened.

The room was like a blast from her past. People she hadn't seen since 1962 were there in droves. Some milled around in the backyard and some worked the BBQ. A wave of discomfort hit her and she had an urge to run. Inez strolled up to her. "I'm so glad you could come! Momma will want to see you first."

And like a queen in her court, there sat Maybelle. The ravages of chemotherapy made her look tired under her new wig. A bit thinner but still rubenesque. There were bags under her eyes but all in all she looked the same. Something about black women that Amber had noted before. They never seem to age. Amber made her way over to her.

"Mrs. Stubbs, I'm so glad to see you." She said with a confidence she did not have.

"Child, you better just get over her and give Miss Maybelle a big ole hug." She squealed.

She leaned down to her and was caught up in her marshmallow arms. A warmth swept over Amber that she never felt before. This woman who put up with her childish tantrums, haughty attitude and air of entitlement, just welcomed her like the Prodigal Son. It was so foreign to Amber that tears welled up in her eyes. Maybelle pulled back and stared at her.

"Now Sweetie, don't get all teary eyed with me. You'll get us all

started." Maybelle smiled, "Don't smudge that make-up little girl. Your mother wouldn'tâ€¦.How is your mother Amber? Has she gotten any better?"

How did she know? "She has her days," Amber said taken aback, "How is it for you?"

"Ahhhh, the devils gotten in to my bra and just won't get out." The room burst into laughter and Amber smiled.

"Help me up child," Maybelle pulled on Amber's arm. She stood with difficulty, but her voice boomed.

"I'm gonna need everyone's attention over this way," she began as she leaned on Amber. "Most of you know Amber and some of you have a history with her. But the past is the past. Each of you have parts of your life you would rather not look back on. Some bigger than others. For 20 years as we have grown to be a family, though a part was always missing. Today your sister comes home. Please treat her with the respect I have shown each of you.. I know all of you have the kindness in your heart to forget the past. Today is a new day."

Amber looked around the room through her tears and she saw smiles. Genuine smiles. These people were open and ready to forgive. It was amazing.

"Seaweed, get her a chair by me." Maybelle called out. Seaweed handed the small girl that had greeted Amber at the door to a carbon copy adult woman, who had BBQ sauce stains on her apron. The puzzle came together. Grammy/Penny, Grampy/Seaweed, Grammay/Maybelle. Amber had given that couple six months. Now here they were 20 years later, creating a whole new generation. Damn, just damn.

"How are you Amber, how about a seat?" Seaweed smiled warmly, "Can I get you an ice tea?"

"Oh thank you. It's great to see you Seaweed. Your granddaughter is lovely."

"She's my apple dumpling!" he beamed with pride, "Named for Momma and just as sassy."

Maybelle smacked his arm. "You hush your mouth, boy. I'm gonna show you some sass if you don't hustle to get that tea." Maybelle turned to the crowd again.

:"Now, Miss Amber and I are going to do some catching up, but don't feel like you can't join in. We'll be right over here and I want each of you to come by and say a big hello. There's a whole lotta years and a whole lotta happenings to catch up on. Tell her you're glad she's here and make her feel welcome"

No one ran out of the room. No one turned and walked away. That bitch Von Tussle didn't ruin the party, in fact, people seemed to go on as if she belonged there. .So this is what family is, Amber thought. This is home.

Chapter twelve

As the hours that seemed like minutes ticked by, people greeted Amber. She tried to apologize to each of them for her actions, but Maybelle would hear none of it. Just coming back with them shows that she is a different person than she was. After all, none of them were the people they were 20 years ago. Now is now and they would only look forward.

Tracy was the first. Still bouncy and chubby, she wore her weight well. There was something about a confident woman that made her attractive no matter what. She added the glee that she had been recently divorced her husband of 14 years and had dropped twenty pounds. "I could say I lost 250 pounds of useless weight when I got rid of him, but that would be mean." They all laughed.

Tracy had taken her council money and gone on to college, as so many of the kids did. After her time in the spotlight, she became just another overweight girl. She never regretted her time on the show, but she realized that it opened her eyes and killed her innocence. She wasn't going onto Broadway, she wasn't going to be a "star". And she sure wasn't doing laundry the rest of her life, either. She majored in education and now teaches Kindergarten.

"It's funny Amber," Tracy said with a smile, "The kids never thought of me as less than anyone else. I can sing and dance or laugh and giggle. They all think I'm wonderful. I guess I really am a star. I'm a Kindergarten star"

"Tracy, that's perfect. I can't tell you how happy I am for you." Amber smiled, "What about Link? Will he be here? Do you hear from him"

Tracy looked out the window, "He had different dreams than I had." She stated plainly. "Life was hard for him back then. He was beautiful and I didn't fit. Ask Seaweed and Penny what they went through after their first daughter was born. People were so horrible to those of us who were different. They moved to Arizona to get away from it"

Tracy stared into Amber's eyes. "I couldn't blame Link for wanting to be with the perfect girls. About the time he got that record contract, I knew I didn't belong. He moved to NY and I moved on to college. We wrote to each other for a while. In fact he "broke up" with me in one of those letters. I told him that we should remain friends and we sent Christmas cards for a few years. We even sent birth announcements to each other. My kids got fabulous gifts from him. Then I noticed that the personalizations stopped and I was getting stamped autographs. The third year of that and I stopped caring. Maybelle knows where he is. Isn't he still on the strip, Grammy?"

"Got a card of regret from him last week." Maybelle popped in, "He is pretty happy about doing the show out there. Vegas has been good to him."

Amber made a mental note. She needed Link Larkin for this Reunion. "Maybelle, will he come back for the show?" The business woman in Amber kicked in.

"Well sweetheart, it depends on how this new contract of his reads." Maybelle stated, "You know how that legal stuff goes."

One by one, each council member greeted her and told stories of themselves or members who weren't there. Some of the boys went to Vietnam. Tyrone came back without an arm but showed Amber that he could still shimmy and shake with the best of them. Brad and Little Mo never came back. Lou Ann had been seriously injured in a car accident and lost an eye. It didn't seem to bother her. Noreen was there but Doreen had moved to Cleveland and couldn't make it. She ran a dance studio. Shelley introduced Amber to her friend, a tall athletic woman who was a gym teacher. Amber smiled. So many of her feminist friends were lesbian but hid it from view. If Shelly felt comfortable enough to bring her lover, this sure was home. IQ lived up to his name. He was at NASA working on the shuttle. He used to say, "It isn't rocket science." as the other members struggled through homework. Well it wasn't for him and he should know! All in all most of the kids turned out well. There were doctors and lawyers, shopkeepers and hotel operators. And children, seemed like hundreds of children. Amber was thoughtfully looking at children of all colors playing together. She silently wished some of them were hers. Let's see, if she had married Corny by 1965 and had started a family by, lets say, 1970, those kids would be with the pre-teens playing Atari in the gameroom. That wouldn't have been too bad. She envisioned a boy, tall like his father, with those eyes like deep poolsâ€¦|..

"Hey Amber!!!" Bix broke into her thoughts. Her eyes refocused on his face, bringing her back from her daydreaming.

Bix had moved to Atlanta and was a cameraman at WTBS. "Welcome to the club, Miss Station Queen." He joked, "Cable opens up a whole new world. With lots of hours! I was actually scheduled but told my boss that I wasn't missing this party for anything."

They both laughed.

"Boy, you've got that right," Amber grinned. "I've never been so busy."

Brenda interrupted their conversation. "Hi Amber! How have you been? She said as leaned in for a hug. "You look great."

Amber would later learn from Inez that Brenda's mother raised Brenda's baby as her own. Brenda's "little sister" didn't know for many years who her real mother was. They had a fabulous relationship. Brenda could play the big sister role and was able to treat her own child as the little sister she never had. She returned to the show after fighting hard to get her figure back and would bring her mom and sister with her to visit. No one spoke about it. When her mother died, Brenda told the child the truth, but it didn't affect their relationship at all. The little girl was now in college herself and knows that Brenda's children are her half brother and sister. It all worked out well.

Amber had cocked her head at Inez when she told the story. "Inez, we all heard the rumors when Brenda left. Do you know? Was Corny the father of that baby?" she asked holding her breath.

:"Not according to Momma. Corny had his eye on another girl." Then

she was called away by Seaweed.. Amber wanted to let it go, but the words stuck in her mind. She compartmentalized it and would think about it later.

The party began to wind down. People started to say their goodbyes. Every person there asked Amber if she would come back for the Annual Labor Day picnic Maybelle always hosted. Amber replied honestly that she wouldn't miss it. Inez reminded all of them about the reunion show and how they would be contacted soon. The house was empty before they knew it.

Inez, Penny and Penny's daughter Janette began to clean up. Amber stood to help but was waved away. "Stay with Momma," Inez said, "She would love the company."

Maybelle yawned and stretched.

"Maybelle isn't it time for you to get to bed," Amber began, "Can I help you?"

"Aww Sugar, that's real kind of you to offer." Maybelle began "but if I you just help me recline this chair, I should be just fine. Oh that's good. Now come sit by me and let's have a real talk."

"Maybelle, I just want to thank you for inviting me here today. I've never felt so welcome anywhere." Amber sighed.

"This isn't the first invitation that has come to you, Honey. I've sent out many a card. You never wrote back."

Guilt washed over Amber. Year after year she saw Maybelle's name on the left top corner of envelopes. She was always afraid to open them. She would throw them away in fear her curiosity would be peaked. What could this woman possibly want with her?

"My secretary must have misplaced them." She lied, "I'll speak with her."

"So what are the plans for my reunion? When are we looking at?"

Amber exploded with thoughts and ideas. A sweeps month special would put the show on the first week of November.. She wanted the sets to be classic, the music to be upbeat, and The Council kids would tell their stories. Live interviews and vintage films. She wanted Seaweed to tell about the struggles of an inter-racial couple, Tyrone to tell of Vietnam, Inez to sing her hits and Cornyâ€|â€|..

She stopped, "Maybelle, what about Corny?"

"Do you know where he is?" Maybelle asked simply.

"I wish I did." Amber exclaimed.

Maybelle's eyes twinkled. "I always tell the kids, when Corny Collins wants to be found, he will be found. Understand?" Amber shook her head, no. She didn't understand.

"You are the person to find him Amber. Do you get what I'm saying to

you? You, Amber Von Tussle can reach him. You can use WYZZ to find him. Put out the call, get it on the news. Ask him to come back, only you have what he wants. Don't you know?" Maybelle's hinting was going right over her head. "Child, just do what I say and you might just be surprised."

Amber pondered it for a moment. What a way to market this reunion! It was brilliant! Corny Collins was missing and the show might just have to go on without him, but not with the viewers help. Where was Corny? If Amber had her way, it would become the cry of baby boomers across the country. And perhaps, just perhaps he would be found. Then Amber might just be able to make her own dreams come true. Her words broke into her own thoughts.

"That's what I'll do Maybelle. I'll start tomorrow. I'll get with the news department andâ€¦."

Her words trailed off when she heard a soft snore next to her. She tiptoed away to find Inez. She thanked her again, told her that she would be in touch and headed for her car. Amber Von Tussle would not sleep tonight.

13. Chapter 13

Chapter thirteen â€" one month later

The plane took off on time from Baltimore to Las Vegas. Inez sat next to Amber in first class. She stretched her legs and put her tray table down.

"Are you ready to wheel and deal there Ms. Amber?" Inez asked.

"Do you have your checkbook, Ms. Inez?" Amber chided.

"Honey, it's burnin' a hole in my pocket."

They both laughed. Amber smiled. She was surprised that they had turned into such good friends. Neither one of them had sisters and somehow they had fallen into that role for each other. No difference in age, color or way of life made any difference. As they worked together to make the reunion happen, it was like they were singing a duet. They complimented each other to a tee. They were in perfect harmony.

Everything was going along fine with the program. The stockholders at WYZZ were positively giddy about the idea. They started running teasers immediately. "Where's Corny?", "Do you remember the Corny Collins Show?", "Did you dream of being one of the "Nicest Kids in Town?" The buzz took off immediately. Leads began to flow into the station about Corny's whereabouts. Inez found private investigators who took the leads and ran with them. So far, the leads went no where but for every one they looked into, five more came in. Amber and Inez were hopeful when another wrench got into the works. Link could not work around his contract. He had two shows every weekend through Thanksgiving. The management wouldn't budge. Inez knew that for the right amount of money, anyone would budge. Amber agreed.

They chit chatted about the inner workings of the entertainment industry. How Maybelle built her empire and shared so much of her

wealth. Inez told of all the times Maybelle had set her friends up in businesses of their own. Even Tracy's mom got a call from Maybelle one day. Her dream of her own Laundromat materialized. She worked so hard at it, that she worked herself to death. Edna's heart gave out as she watched the washers go around. She actually died with a smile on her face.

The drink cart began down the aisle. Coffee for Amber, tea for Inez. A thought came to Amber's mind, "Inez, I have to ask you something and you don't have to answer if you don't want to." Inez nodded and Amber continued, "Why did you name your daughter Amber? I would think the name would have horrible memories attached to it. Who would want to curse her child with the name of Amber?"

Inez took a deep breath. "Amber, you don't know how hard it was for us out in California. Momma said the Devil got a hold of us and would not let go. When Charisse died, there were so many phone calls that came in. So many people that were looking for interviews and exclusives. We didn't want to talk to anyone and Momma being Momma could kindly but firmly let people know that we were not interested. We were just about to take that phone off the hook when it rang one more time. And you were on the other end."

Amber's eyebrows shot up.

"Yes ma'am, It was you. Momma told me later that she almost hung up. She thought for sure you were looking for a story and nothing more. But she heard you quietly ask her please, don't hang up, and the sympathy she heard in your voice. She said that you told her how sorry you were, you sent your regrets and hoped that both of us could find peace. Then you were gone."

Amber remembered. She had been so shocked by the death of that girl. She wanted to go to the funeral, and while so few people intimidated her, those people from her past did. She decided on the phone call and had to pull some strings to get the home number, using the "Exclusive Interview" as an excuse. When she dialed the number, she didn't know what she was going to say. Tears flowed when Maybelle picked up. She had to get to the point or she would lose any composure she had left. After she hung up, she cried for an hour, wishing she was braver in the situation.

"I can't tell you that I didn't hate your guts before that call." Inez stated.

"Oh that feeling was mutual." Amber laughed.

"And Amber, may I be frank? I had no reason to hate you. I had everything you didn't. I got it all." Amber looked at her incredulously, "After that call, I screamed at Momma, 'How could you talk to that heifer? She made our lives so miserable' but Momma told me that the problems there were not caused by you, they were caused by your mother. You were just her puppet. She pulled your strings and you performed. You had no mind of your own, you just did what she told you. She told me how bad you had it, the birthday parties where you could have no cake, the holidays where you were paraded from party to party until the late night to perform for sick drooling men, and the nearly overnight dance practices to have you know the steps that no one else did. Momma saw your feet bleed and the bags under your eyes that were covered by pancake make-up. She knew what you

were going through"

Amber was amazed. She didn't know that anyone knew, or cared. It was all normal to her at the time, but it never quite felt right. She didn't know that anyone could see, or would see for that matter.

"When we got back home to Baltimore, I began to watch your career." She continued. "I grew such admiration for you. Like my people, you had overcome such adversity and never let it slow you down. I grew to like you, to really feel that you were a fine woman. A woman that I wanted to be and I wanted my daughters to be. Only Momma was not shocked when I named that baby Amber. She knew what you were and why I felt the way I did. My people had the support of each other. You had the support of no one." She paused, "Except Corny of course."

Amber's breath sucked in, "Really? How so?"

Inez looked at her. She looked genuinely puzzled.

"Let me tell you a story. I remember cleaning out your vanity. I wanted to sweep all your stuff into one big box and dance on it." Inez giggled, "but Momma told me that we must treat others as we want to be treated. I was not happy with that, I will tell you. I sat grumbling as I put every bit of your make-up and hair accessories, wrapped in tissue and placed in the box. As the girls walked by, we started to say the most horrible things about you. You know how evil girls can be. It snowballed until the cackling and name calling could be heard everywhere. Then Corny walked in. We fell silent but it was too late. He had heard what we had said and his eyes were on fire. He was mad and all of us knew it. We tried to look down or hide. Then his voice boomed out, 'Each of you girls is acting like you can't be fired from this show. Well, I'm gonna ask you a question, Who's name is on this show?' We were silent, some of us crying."

Inez continued, "He bellowed, 'Mine. This is The Corny Collins Show. And mark my words all you little girls, if I hear the name of Amber Von Tussle used in the way I have just heard it used, as God is my witness there will be a whole new group of Councilettes the very next day.' Then he pointed to me."

She took a deep breath, "He added, 'And that includes Miss Teenage Hairspray. Inez Stubbs, your mother taught you better than this' He cut us all one more nasty look and stormed out. And not one Council member dared breathe your name again."

"Wow." Was all Amber could muster up.

"Yeah, I was pretty scared myself. Scared he was gonna tell my Momma and she would tan my hide!!." She laughed right out loud, "We all thought you would be back. Dancing among us with your snotty attitude. Then we saw you on WBAL as the Weathergirl, and we knew your Mother had gotten you in there. That is until Earl the security guard told his partner Randy who was Vicki's boyfriend about Corny's call. Rumors began to fly after that but none of us could talk while in the studio. We had to gossip on the phoneâ€|â€|."

Amber interrupted her. "Wait Inez, what call?"

"The call that Corny made to his friend at WBAL. That favor he called in for you. You knowâ€|â€|"

Inez glanced over at Amber who was blanched whiter than even a white girl should be. "Are you okay?"

"Ahâ€|yes." Amber answered lying through her teeth. She wasn't fine at all.

"Honestly, I never knew. I never imaginedâ€|.."

Inez was tempted to grab and airsickness bag. "Honey seriously, you don't look so good. Why don't you put your seat back and take a rest."

Amber still couldn't move. What did this mean? She wanted to be angry because this meant that she didn't do it all on her own. But then again, she did make it the rest of the way by herself or she would still be a weatherbimbo. It also meant that Corny cared aboutâ€|â€|.

"Amber, have I stepped where I shouldn't have? Inez broke in. "Is this something I shouldn't know about? Because if you and Corny were actually involved, even Momma denied it. She never knew either."

"No, uh no. We weren't involved." Amber turned to her with a sudden need to tell someone. Someone who would understand. Someone who knew them both. "But Inez, can I tell you something? Something I've never told another soul?"

"Why of course!"

"If he had approached me, I wouldn't have had a moment's hesitation." She said breathlessly.

"Ha! You and every other Councillette!" Inez snorted, "Black or White! You weren't alone in that. Not one girl wouldn't give it up for Corny Collins."

Amber wasn't stupid, she knew that. She just never lumped herself in with everyone else. She saw him differently, or so she thought.

"Let me tell you something too" she continued, "When Brenda took her "leave of absence", you know the word that went down. I remember overhearing my Auntie speaking with my mother about it. Like I told you, Momma said Corny had his eye out for another one of the girls. In fact, she said she wasn't even sure that he knew how much he watched her or was affected by her. As soon as this girl turned 18, Momma was going to talk to Corny. I don't know if she ever got the chance. She wanted him married with a bunch of kids. And she could butt into a person's life with such skill that they never knew what hit them. So what do you think Amber? Do you think that girl was you?"

Amber choked on her coffee.

Chapter Fourteen- August

The plans were going so well, that Amber almost knew that her dreams of finding Corny were gone. Detectives and Private Investigators turned up nothing and nothing again. Inez had given up and decided that Link should host the show. She paid enough money for him after all. Maybelle would be next to him, just like she was announcing "Negro Day" but didn't have the strength to be the hostess for the entire show.

The sets were done, the musicians were in place. The Council members, about 30 in all, began practicing those old dances and discovered muscles that had been dormant for years. When Amber walked through the second day of rehearsal, she never smelled so much Ben Gay in her life. This was worse than the gym on senior day.

Amber took the elevator to her office on the 40th floor. "Millie, I can't be disturbed."

"Yes Ms. Von Tussle." She replied.

What were these people missing in the search for Corny? What was the key that would open the box?

She took herself back to the conversation with Maybelle. She had said, "You Amber Von Tussle can reach him." How strange. She had called her child or honey all night. Why her whole name? Maybe to grasp her attention? Then she said something stranger.

"Ask him to come back, only you have what he wants."

Wait! How does she know what he wants? She didn't say "had what he wanted", she said, "has what he wants."

Suddenly it hit her like a ton of bricks. Maybelle knows where he is. She was sure of it. Why she hadn't told or why she didn't help, was still a mystery, but Amber was positive Maybelle was the key. She flew out of the office, yelling for Millie to reschedule her appointments.

Her car raced to Maybelle's house and she rang the bell frantically. The housekeeper opened the door and Amber pushed inside. "Hi Nina, I need to see Maybelle immediately." She said as she scurried past. "Will I find her in the Sunroom?" Nina nodded and Amber quickly made her way there.

Maybelle was intent on General Hospital. She loved her soaps. She looked up, "Oh Amber Honey, give me til the top of the hour. Luke and Laura are on."

Amber was about to burst but waited the seven minutes until the program ended. "Oooo, I love that Tristian Rogers. He accent makes me think I'm a younger woman." Maybelle purred. "Now baby sit down, you look like you're about to jump out of your skin. What's wrong?"

Amber drew a deep breath and counted to ten.

"Maybelle, why didn't you tell me you knew where Corny was?" she blurted out.

"Well, you never asked." She stated.

Amber had never been one to smack a human being in her adult life. God knows her mother would have been first on the list. But right now if Amber were younger and Maybelle were healthier, she might have just found a place for her palm upside Maybelle's head. Amber had her "ah-ha" moment but all she wanted to do was scream. She held her own hands behind her back and worked hard to kick into professional mode.

"If you knew where he was, why did you waste all our time?" she began in a slow deep voice, "Let Inez spend all that money? Make us look like fools?"

Maybelle sighed. "Come and sit Amber. Let me tell you how hard this has been for me too."

The last thing Amber wanted to do was sit and chat with this woman. She felt betrayed, used, played. Maybe this was all planned, maybe this was the revenge from years ago. The hostess of the Corny Collins show couldn't take it out on the bitch stage manager who abused her, so take it out on her daughter. Many people are very patient with revenge, perhaps this was all well thought out. Now since the cats out of the bag, they all pull out of the reunion show and Amber is left to clean up. Oh the stockholders will love thisâ€¦Maybelle's words .broke into her thoughts.

"I can see it in your eyes Amber, you are not happy with me right now" she spoke softly. "But please understand that there are bigger things than you and me in the world.. Friendship, loyalty and love far outweigh our feelings from moment to moment. I am where I am because I have been blessed by Jesus himself, but also because I never let my feelings get in the way of my loyalties to others, Long after I am gone, people will not remember how much money I had or my fine things. They, God willing will remember what a good friend I was and how much love I spread around."

Amber couldn't help but soften at her words. This was the Polar opposite of her own mother. Step on who you can, care not who you hurt. Just get to the top. Amber herself worked hard to be loyal, and here it flowed from Maybelle, straight from her heart.

"When Inez and I went on BET and they mentioned a reunion, I was still in remission. I felt that if we pulled the show back locally, Corny would consider it. He would never go back to California and even New York is in doubt. With your station going on Cable it was perfect. I put Inez on the concept. She worked very hard to talk to people and get them to agree. And I went back to the doctor, you know how that goes." Maybelle looked down.

After a pause, she continued, "With my diagnosis, things were put on hold for a bit. Cancer is a particular evil. You think you're fine but it's eating away at you. I'm saved and I'm not afraid for Jesus to take me home. The family is afraid, but I'm not."

For the first time, tears welled in Maybelle's eyes and Amber nearly lost it herself. They both took a deep breath and she continued, "I had originally approached Corny with this idea. He said no. I went back and offered money for his shelter, he said no. I told him it was

moving back to Baltimore, he said no. Offer after offer there was no way I could get him to agree."

Maybelle suddenly took Amber's hand and stared right into her eyes. "I don't think you understand how long he's watched you. He's been saving newspaper clippings and magazine articles about you for years. He does the same with us but I see the difference. With you, the longing is there. That's why I was sure that you could bring him out. I felt that if you would ask, he would come."

Amber's stomach flipped. The words "watched you" stuck in her mind and she drifted back to those parties where she blew him off so many times. She suddenly hated the entire woman's movement and the feminist ideal. She wanted to be 18 again and start all over. Start with him.

"So where is he Maybelle?" she whispered. "How do I find him?"

"I can't tell you."

"WHAT!" Amber cried, "Don't do this! Don't drop a bomb and then play games. You can't ruin this show Maybelle. You pulled me into this, I set my career on the line for it. The show will beâ€|â€|."

"Is that all it's about? It's the show?" Maybelle asked simply.

Amber's mouth hung open. What could she say?

"He said it was all about the show. He said that he wasn't going to do this just to make you a dollar and send your ratings soaring. He said you were your mother."

"I am not!" Amber screamed stomping her foot in a return to her childhood. "I am not my mother and no one has any right to call me that. I've never been her. He should know that. He was the one who saw me at the bottom. He was the only one who cared. He should have called me. He should have found me. Damn it! That's all I wanted. All I ever wantedâ€|.heâ€|..shouldâ€|." Amber was hysterical now. She plopped into a chair and waves of sobs overcame her. Maybelle stood and put an arm around her. She cried for a while.

Finally Maybelle lifted Amber's chin. "You sound like you have a bit of longing going on yourself. I have to ask you, Honey, before we go any farther. Will you hurt him? Will you leave him if he opens up to you?"

Amber looked straight into her eyes. "No. I couldn't. I could never leave him again."

"Thank You Jesus!" Maybelle sang looking up to heaven., "My prayers have been answered! " she looked to Amber again, "You see Sweetie, I know what it is to lose him. He is my baby brother, my best friend. I was the only person he contacted before he left and the only one he spoke to when he came back I wanted to shout to the world that he was found. But he didn't want to be found. He wanted to become the man he wanted to be. Loving and giving without the recognition. And that's what he is. I couldn't ruin it for him. I love him too."

"So where is he?" Amber sobbed.

"I still can't tell you, because I promised him I wouldn't."

Amber put her head in her hands.

"No, no Honey, I can help you to find him, but I can't tell you myself. It's all bigger than us. I'm going to give you a hint." Maybelle grabbed a piece of paper and a pen. She scribbled an address. "Go here, Sunday at noon. Don't be late. Sit in the front and watch the choir. Your hint is there."

Amber looked at the piece of paper then back at Maybelle. "What if you're wrong? What if it's not about me at all?"

"That's the chance we'll have to take. He may hate me for what I've done. And if I'm willing to risk it, you should be too. But I'm not known to be wrong too often about those I love. Do it Baby. Or you'll never know."

Amber wasn't sure she wanted to know.

15. Chapter 15

Chapter fifteen " Sunday

Amber dressed in black. Her funeral suit, it was linen but didn't look too expensive. She didn't want to be noticed. The hardest thing about the whole situation was that she was still Amber Von Tussle and the press looked out for her. Hopefully, they would all be in church themselves, this hot, sunny Sunday.

She had looked on a map of Baltimore and found the address Maybelle gave her. The location made her smile. No wonder Maybelle picked a residence in Mt. Vernon. It was walking distance from this spot. Sly old vixen she was! Amber watched the time. She didn't want to get there too early in case someone recognized her, the whispers would begin. She didn't need to be talking to admirers, she needed to scrutinize the place. There was a hint there and she needed to find it.

The sign read "Grace & St. Peter's Parish" in front of the brownstown church. Amber found a place to park and hurried in. She had pulled her hair up and wrapped it with a scarf. Her sunglasses came off in the vestibule. She looked around and let her eyes get adjusted to the light. The smell of wood and candles drifted towards her. She continued to look around but the door opened only for worshipers. No one seemed to see her go in. She pulled the brass handle of the door to the main. It moaned a loud creak, but it disturbed no one. She followed the lead of the people around her and knelt on one knee before seizing a seat in a front pew. She then began to look around. Her "hint" was here.

It was a beautiful old church. Carved wood and stained glass everywhere. Statues and candles, graced the alcoves of the walls and worshipers knelt as they prayed then lit a small candle. Amber knew there was something about this ritual that was powerful, but because Velma had no time for religion, Amber didn't either. Maybe this was her time to start. Maybelle and Inez often went through the day thanking Jesus for His gifts. Whether the coffee was done or an

important letter came in the mail, they thanked Him first. Perhaps, even though Amber wasn't sure she actually believed in this guy, Jesus might just listen to her now.

"Jesus," she silently prayed, "I know you don't know me and really I don't know you. Could you help us out here? For me, for Maybelle, you know her, and forâ€¦"

Suddenly bells rang from the back of the church. "Good morning." A lady stated from a tall pulpit. "Welcome to Grace & St. Peter's Anglo-Catholic Church"

Everyone stood and the choir began to file in. They took the seats to the side of the Altar. One by one the members made their way down the pews with books in hand and dressed in red robes. Amber studied the faces as they came in. Some she could see clearly, some she had to squint to see. Before long the organ sounded a chord and they began to sing. It was beautiful, but that didn't matter to Amber now. She was trying to both listen to the words of the song and study those faces. Her hint could be anywhere. The song ended as the Priest who processed up the aisle, kissed the Altar. The High Holy Mass began.

"In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." The Priest said as he waved his hand and the worshipers crossed themselves. "The Grace of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you allâ€¦"

Amber was straining to see the back row of the choir members as the mass continued. She looked from face to face and not a single one looked familiar as they recited the prayers with one another. Nor was there a single phrase from the prayer that stuck out for her, She was focusing so hard that she never noticed the Cantor mounting the steps of the Pulpit. A pause in the mass and his voice rang out.

"Kyrie elei-ei-ei-ei-ei.

Ei-ei-ei-ei-leison"

Her heart skipped a beat. The voice was deep and rich, with a soft velvet tone that resonated against the walls of the church. No matter that the Greek words were totally foreign to her ears, that voice certainly wasn't. Her breath came in spurts and she whispered, "Oh God, Oh God." over and over. She squeezed her eyes shut. She couldn't look yet, not until she was sure she wasn't dreaming. Then she turned her head and opened her eyes. Yes, he was there. Still there, still beautiful.

She studied the face above her. There was grey at the temples of his well combed hair. No longer greased down and back, but cut conservatively. The mustache and small goatee hid the fullness of his lips as they embraced each note. Half glasses teetered on the edge of his nose. He stood as tall as ever, no longer singing for an audience of screaming teenie boppers, now singing for God.

He took a breath, "Christie-ei-ei-eiâ€¦"

That familiar chill ran up her spine and she smiled. Then suddenly she had a thought. Without taking her eyes off him, she reached to her side for the bulletin she picked up from the vestibule. As she

pulled it toward her, the missal on top fell to the floor with a loud bang. She jumped. Then their eyes met for a fraction of a second before she looked down. Did she see his eyebrows raise? She couldn't be sure.

She opened the bulletin. Who had he become? Why was this man so hard for everyone to find when he was actually right under their noses? Her eyes ran down the names until she saw word, "Cantor" followed by "Colin Cornelius Esq."

"Well I'll be damned." She murmured, then suppressed a giggle. How clever, she thought, he was truly hidden in plain sight.

The mass went on forever. Amber's thoughts raced. What would she say? Especially when all she wanted to do was run into his arms. She needed to talk about the show, tell him that she was sorry for all the times she walked away from him, tell him how stupid she was for pushing her career before what she really wanted and wished for now, tell him how much she needed him to hold her, touch her, make their nighttime lovemaking real. She wanted to touch him as he wanted to be touched and give him every last shiver that heâ€|â€|â€|.

Amber flushed. Holy Crap, she couldn't be thinking about this in the middle of a church.

The whole thing seemed to be winding down. The crowd had shuffled up to receive the white wafers and the choir sang, led by Corny himself. Amber let herself drift away on the sound of his voice. She swore she could hear him even though there were thirty voices singing. Another few priestly gestures, then the final song. The last note rang out and an announcement came regarding coffee and donuts in the community room. She would follow him there. The choir moved out, softly chatting and studying the songbooks. Her eyes swept the crowd and didn't see him. A bit of panic came upon her, but she realized that he would be here every week. Even if she didn't talk to him today, he was the Cantor. He would be there the following week. And the next and the next. Amber could see herself going to church every Sunday for the first time in her life. Maybe he'd ask her to come. Maybe she could join this choir and they could sing together. Her thoughts got away from her.

She signed and turned to collect her things. As she took her purse from the seat next to her, strong fingers came and grasped the kneeler in front of her. She jumped. Oh dear Lord. She glanced up and stared directly into those eyes.

"You look JUST like your mother."

16. Chapter 16

Chapter Sixteen

Amber silently stared into his eyes as a smile played on his lips. "How are you Amber? Guess Maybelle got too impatient afterall."

Her mouth wouldn't work, her brain was frozen. "Um, ah, what do I call you?"

"Cantor" he whispered, "That's what everyone calls me here. But we

can't talk in Our Lord's house." He motioned for her to follow him, "Come on."

People smiled at him as they made their way through the church, down a flight of steps and into a large crowded hall. As soon as he walked through the door, people made their way over. "Cantor, it was wonderful", "Cantor, fine job", "I like the new entrance hymn, Cantor." Little old ladies and children hugged him. Men shook his hand and slapped his shoulder. He had a small conversation with each one. Then the priest arrived and the focus turned to him. They made their way to a table.

"Can I buy you breakfast? He asked

"Thank you," she said with a confidence she did not feel, "I'll just have coffee please."

"Still not eating, huh?" he quizzed and she could see the laugh lines that etched his face. She did everything she could to hide her own. On Corny they were a compliment to his smile and added so much to his already attractive features. "Suit yourself," he added, "Personally I'm shooting for the most sugar I can get."

He headed off to the buffet table and Amber saw him laughing and joking with the ladies there. Something wasn't right with the situation. Why wasn't he miserable? Amber somehow suspected that she was going to find him living in a box, downcast and depressed. Maybe in a homeless shelter, maybe a group home. Far from the sight that presented itself now. Corny worked the room as he did at the media parties of the 60's. A handshake here, a quick embrace there. Sometimes a laugh or a smile. She saw Corny Collins, plain and simple. He hadn't changed at all. Just in a different place but the same person. She was puzzled.

He made his way back to her table and presented her with a steaming cup of coffee. She couldn't help but notice the hand that grasped the cup was plain. No glint of gold encircled any fingers of his left hand. A smile spread on her face. As far as she could see, he didn't belong to anyone else.

"So Maybelle couldn't wait for you to figure out that her Private Investigators were being paid not to find me." He said as he bit into a chocolate donut with sprinkles. "I told her you were smarter than that, butâ€¦|.."

"Inez found the Investigators." Amber corrected him, "Not Maybelle."

"Inez found them," he murmured wiping his mouth with a napkin, "but Maybelle paid them. From what I hear, they enjoyed finding nothing for a good amount of money."

Amber looked down and felt foolish, but his words interrupted her thoughts "Amber, honestly, I want to tell you that I was sorry to hear about your mother. I was shocked to hear how serious her condition was. Is there any chance for recovery?"

"No not really. She seems happy, but the doctors say that she will never be whole again." Amber studied his face. She saw genuine concern. "But really, Cornâ€¦|.uhâ€¦|.Cantor, she has no clue what is

going on. If she's fed and clean, she's okay. There's not really much I can do for her."

"That's too bad" he replied, "And how are you 'Woman of the Year'? How are you fairing?"

Amber became more comfortable as the coffee kicked in. "Better now."

>Yikes!! Did she just say that?<p>

"Oh I bet." He taunted, "Wait, is that a blush I see? Why AVT what's up with you? Are you getting smooshie with me?" He leaned back in the chair and grinned.

She wanted to crawl, "No, I mean, I really came to talk about the show andâ€|"

He squinted at her, "Okay, I'll talk about the show, but I don't think you want to hear what I have to say." He stated.

She had to tread lightly with this. She needed to let him know that it wasn't the show that brought her here, but he also seemed pretty happy with his entire situation. She didn't see any "longing" that Maybelle saw. In fact, she saw the same man she always saw, when HER knees gave out, when HER heart skipped beats, not his. Not ever. She needed to go off in a different direction.

"Well since I don't want to hear it anyway, why don't we talk about something else. Like what happened to you." Stating the first thing that came to her mind.

"Not much to tell." He started. "I didn't like who I was and I left."

"And stayed hidden for 20 years. Intentionally hidden. I think there's a bit more to it than that." Without thinking about it she kicked into interview mode.

"Look, let's get this straight right from the beginning," he said as his eyes rolled, "I know that you have a lot invested in this show. I see it being advertised as the biggest thing since color television, but you're not waltzing into my life to get that exclusive interview and ruining it in the process. I like where I am AVT, I'm happy here. We can sit and we can talk but nothing you can offer me will change my mind."

He leaned into her and his voice was low, "Nothing. Got it? I mean nothing. If you try a Velma Von Tussle on me it won't get you anywhere. I saw your mother do men much more powerful than me, but I have a different resolve and you will get no where."

Amber couldn't look at him. Maybelle was right in this way, he thought she was her mother. Willing to screw him to get her way. She wanted to be angry, push him to the ground, dig a heel into his smarmy face and walk away.

Really no, she didn't want to do that. She wanted to slink away and never look at him again. She saw a tear fall onto her black linen skirt and she quickly brushed it away, hoping he wouldn't notice. "I'm not my mother." She said in a weak voice.

He saw the tear and tried to ignore it. "Okay, prove it." He said as he leaned back again.

She never looked up, "How?"

"Join me for dinner tonight."

"Huh?" her face flew up and he saw her red rimmed eyes.

"Will you come with me to dinner tonight?"

"Iâ€¦I guess." She stammered, "Where can I meet you?" She was so confused.

"You won't meet me, I'll pick you up." He grinned, "Do you think I simple Cantor will be allowed in your building?"

"Huh?" she was still trying to process all of it, "Yes, of course. You know where it is?"

"Doesn't everyone?" he stood up, "Oh and forget the heels and fine linen suits. Comfortable shoes tonight, okay?"

"Yeah, okay."

He brushed his lips on the back of her hand. His eyes twinkled and he was gone.

17. Chapter 17

**Thank you everyone for your patience yesterday. I had some problems uploading the chapter. And BTW a big thanks to Billy Joel for his song**

Chapter Seventeen

Billy Joel's voice crooned out from her stereo.

"All the waiters in your grand cafe
>Leave their tables when you blink
Every dog must have it everyday
>Every drunk must have his drink
Don't wait for answers
>Just take your chances
Don't ask me why"

She listened more intently than she ever had. Easy for you Billy. You weren't about to be put to a test that could easily destroy the most important dream you've ever had.

"All your life you've had to stand in line
>Still you're standing on your feet<p>

All your choices make you change your mind
>Now your calendar's complete
Don't wait for answers
>Just take your chances
Don't ask me why"

She took the first pair of jeans she bought and attempted to stuff her body into them. Why were fashion jeans so damned tight? She plopped down on her bed, lifted her hips and pulled at the zipper.

They zipped, they buttoned, but she couldn't breathe. And God knows she was breathless enough around this man. She didn't need to hyperventilate from constricting clothing.

"You can say the human heart is only make-believe
>And I am only fighting fire with fire
You are still the victim of the accidents you leave
>Sure as I'm a victim of desire"<p>

Okay, good old Levi's. They may be button front, but at least they seemed to go over her slim hips without having to bounce to get into them. It took her a minute to get the idea that one must button them from the bottom first. She momentarily thought that a nice jogging suit would be better. The heat of the day had already started to wane but not enough for sweats. Or she would be melting in seconds. Melting came naturally around him, exacerbating it wasn't a good idea.

"All the servants in your new hotel
>Throw their roses at your feet
Fool them all but baby I can tell
>You're no stranger to the street
Don't ask for favors
>Don't talk to strangers
Don't ask me why"

Throwing roses at her feet. She knew what Billy meant. She had so many roses thrown at her, in the form of people wanting to please her, she was hard to it. It wasn't often that Amber needed to work to please anyone. She floated through her existence, having every need met by those who used her for a job or fame. She thought a minute about the situation she had been thrown into. Maybelle, Inez and their family members really wanted nothing more from her than her company. She found herself working to please them. She began to bring flowers to Maybelle and trinkets to the children. That little Amber was a charmer. She was everything her namesake wasn't when she was a child. The bright innocence and sweet demeanor made the child irresistible. The first time she ran up and threw her arms around Amber, she stiffened. The girl didn't notice at all.

At first the child sat at her feet, looking up at her with big brown eyes like Amber's own Papillon pup at home. Amber couldn't help but speak with her. She was as lovely as her mother, polite and soft spoken. She melted Amber's heart

"Yesterday you were an only child
>Now your ghosts have gone away
Oh, you can kill them in the classic style
>Now you parlez-vous francais
Don't look for answers
>You took your chances
Don't ask me why
>Don't ask me why"<p>

She didn't feel like an only child anymore. Although all her ghosts have not gone away. She would be haunted by her mother forever. But life was turning around even without Corny Collins. The first time she realized it was when little Amber called her "Auntie Amber". When Amber started bringing her little gifts and jewelry, Inez asked her to stop. They worked very hard to keep the children of the family grounded. Amber sighed and begged Inez to let her have this child as the niece she never had.

"Don't ask me to stop, Inez." She asked, "I promise to keep it to a

minimum but you did name her after me. Can't she have just a little Amber Von Tussle in her?"

Inez laughed. "Only the good parts, alright?"

The child taught her the songs from Sunday School and themes from cartoons. Inez, Maybelle and little Amber harmonized as they sang "Jesus loves the little children." Auntie Amber couldn't help but join in, stumbling on the words. She slipped in as the fourth part in the harmony and it felt right.

At the studio one day, little Amber bounced on a chair as the Council members danced to "New Girl in Town." Black dancers on one side and white on the other. Suddenly she bounded off the chair and grabbed Amber's hand.

"I know this, Auntie!" she squealed, "Dance with me!"

Before she knew it, Inez joined them and they were moving to the tune. The steps were as natural as drawing breath for Amber and they were in perfect synchronization as they dipped and turned. The song ended and the group burst into applause. They hugged and bowed.

"You still got it, Sister!" Inez said between breaths.

"Not without you." Amber replied as she lifted Little Amber, "and an angel cheering me on."

The child kissed her cheek, "You're beautiful Auntie. You need to dance too."

"I'll always dance with you." Amber smiled and hugged her hard.

How did she ever live without these people? The walls that Amber built up had been breached. Inez cracked them, Maybelle widened that crack and little Amber got in. She would never be the same.

And now she had new walls to crack, or did she? In the big picture, she didn't really know. All that she expected Corny to be was far from fact. He seemed happy, not depressed. She didn't see any "longing" that Maybelle was so sure of. She wanted to call Maybelle, tell her that she got the "hint" and ask a zillion questions. But, not in the middle of the Sunday dinner. The answers would be vague because of who might be in the room. Amber was on her own.

She pulled the pink polo over her head and quickly buttoned it up to her throat, then backed off a button. She needed to be modest, not ridiculous. She tucked the shirt into the waistband of her jeans and bent to tie her shoes when the front door buzzer went off. She hopped on one foot and pressed the button.

"Yes?" she said as she leaned against the wall to complete the knot.

"Ms. Von Tussle, a Mr. Cornelius is here to see you." The doorman announced.

"Send him up Andrew."

It was showtime. She had no clue what to expect. Were they going to

the park for a picnic? The docks? A romantic walk through the woods? Her doorbell rang and stomach flipped. "Okay Mr. Jesus," she found herself praying, "Come on through for us again."

She opened the door to his smile and forced a smile to match.

"You ready, AVT?"

"I think so," she replied honestly.

"Come join me in my carriage Princess," He said slyly, "you are about to enter a whole new world."

18. Chapter 18

**I'm uploading quickly to beat the DVD.**

**I hope no one is disappointed with not having to wait.**

Chapter eighteen

He opened the door to the beat up van and motioned her in.

Phew! She was lucky she didn't wear those too tight jeans. Getting into the van was a feat for her 5'4' frame. She grasped onto the seat, leaned on the armrest of the door and plopped her butt in. "Oh that was graceful." She thought.

He made his way to the driver's side and swung easily into the seat. "Okay, so let's go."

"Where are we going?" Amber suddenly had a terrifying thought. What if he were secretly a mass murderer? A man who raped, then murdered women and had a trail of bodies across the country? Did anyone know his past? What if the calm happiness he displayed hid a darker side? She pushed those thoughts away. She had completed enough self defense classes to take care of herself. Her safety was the last thing she needed to worry about. But that sure would bust her delusions about this man. That didn't make her happy at all.

"Where I go every Sunday night." He grinned, "To dinner with my friends. Have you ever peeled a potato AVT?"

"Yes," she said with a puzzled look, "I took a few culinary arts classes in my day."

He snorted, "Well you can put your skills to work tonight. I think we are on KP."

The van rumbled along, sounding badly in need of a muffler. She watched the highway signs go by as they sat in virtual silence with only the radio playing. She wasn't happy with the direction they were going. Down into the roughest neighborhoods of Baltimore.

She saw the graffiti and bars on the store windows. Where in God's name was this man taking her?

The van turned a corner and stopped. The sign read "Booth House Center". Amber knew what this was. She had actually organized a

fundraiser to help this homeless shelter. Run by the Salvation Army, it assisted battered women, alcoholic men and families living in cars. A good meal, a warm place to sleep, and a few Bible verses as well. Those humans at the bottom of their lives got a hand up at Booth House.

"Is this it?" she asked, "Do you live here?"

His eyes widened. "Nooooooo," he said with an air of wit, "but my friends do. Grab that bag AVT. We get to play Santa first."

His door slammed shut as she stared at the building. He opened her door and motioned her out. She slid a little more quickly than she anticipated and stumbled. His arms shot out to steady her. His thumbs brushed her breasts as he lifted her back onto her feet. And his hands stayed. For just a moment, they stayed and she looked into his eyes. She felt his breath come just a little faster and, did she see his face flush? She couldn't be sure.

He looked away as he snapped his hands back. "Sorry. Let's go Amber. We're late already."

He opened the front door. He was right, it was a whole new world. Men with few teeth played cards in the corners, women nursed small babies as they chattered amongst themselves, uniformed workers held Bibles and spoke with kitchen help. Children ran everywhere until Amber heard a cry.

"Mr. C!!!!!"

The children flew to him like pigeons in the park. He picked up a small boy and in a heartbeat he was covered with kids. He hugged and high fived over and over. Amber couldn't help but smile. There was unmitigated joy flowing from all of them, including Corny himself.

A small Latino girl studied Amber carefully. Amber smiled at her but she hid behind Corny's leg. "Oh Maria, no este asustado. Mi Amiga." And the child smiled.

"She scared of new people." Corny told Amber, "She was hurt very badly by a stranger. It will take her time."

"Did you bring me something?" asked a tall boy.

'No, not this time" Groans sounded all around them. "Today you speak with my friend Ms. A. She holds the bag."

Small hands reached out to her and she looked pleadingly to Corny. "What do I do?"

"Open the bag woman!" and he reached inside. There were yo-yos and popguns, little dolls and punching balls. Every child got a small toy, every child was filled with glee. The bag was almost empty when he pulled out a blue rattle.

He looked at one little girl. "Tamika, where's your Momma?"

"She's there." The girl pointed, "She's been waiting to show you."

"Come on Ms. A," he said as he pulled the last gifts out of the bag and placed them in waiting hands, "I have a new friend for you to meet."

The lady sat on a beat up leather couch at the far end of the room. Her eyes were closed and Amber wasn't sure whether she was dozing or praying. She held a tiny baby in her arms. Corny knelt down before her as if she were the Virgin Mary herself holding the Christ Child.

"Claudia? he whispered, "How are you feeling?"

Her eyes fluttered opened. "Oh Mr.C," she exclaimed, "I'm fine, just fine."

"I have something for you." He smiled as he rattled the toy. "It's not much."

"Bless your heart," she smiled, "You've done too much already. Do you want to hold him?"

He beamed as he picked up the small bundle and suddenly Amber was pea green with envy. That could be her baby. Hers and his. He could be smiling at their son. Then she noticed the long tube connected to an oxygen tank trailed from the bunting.

"They delivered the first tank yesterday." Claudia said, "Sergeant Robinson let me ride in the van to pick him up. I didn't have to take the bus."

"You know I would have driven youâ€¦" he began.

"You've done enough." She stated, "He wouldn't be here with me if it wasn't for you."

Suddenly a woman interrupted their talk, "Come on Mr C. You can love that baby later, There's work to be done."

He gently cradled the baby and gave him a kiss. He kissed Claudia's cheek as he handed him back. "Does he have a name?"

"I just call him CC, dontcha know."

"That's trouble." Corny embraced the young mother, "Thank you."

Tears filled Claudia's eyes, "No, thank you."

He grabbed Amber's hand and off to the kitchen they went.

19. Chapter 19

I had planned on having this chapter up at 7am but I got my DVD at 12:01 and my hubby kicked me to bed at 3:15. Sorry._

Chapter nineteen

Potatoes. Bags of them. Each to be peeled and sliced. Amber began to hate potatoes. They were slimy and the dirt got under her

fingernails. Still she peeled. With cuts that stung and the ache in her back getting progressively worse, she peeled. And he sat next to her peeling too, although he seemed to be enjoying the work.

He looked up at her as she brushed a clump of hair from her eyes with the back of her hand. "How do you like my world Princess?" he asked.

"It's work, but it's fine." She lied. She just really wanted to be in a bubble filled tub at home. "I actually raised money for this shelter in 1980." She stated quite proud of herself.

"There's a difference between sitting in your ivory tower throwing money at problems and getting into the trenches yourself." He said as he picked up another potato. That certainly brought her down a few pegs, "but we all do what we need to do. This is what I need to do."

There was a pause. "Can I ask you a question?" she said as she looked up at him.

"As long as it's off the record and you keep peeling."

"Oh, yeah," Amber began to move the knife again. "What's the story with Claudia? What did you do for her?"

"I made a phone call. She needed something and I made it happen."

"Somehow I think it was more than a phone call." Amber thought aloud.

Corny sighed. "Tamika used to come to the shelter with her best friend Lynette." He began, "She would grab a meal and leave. Kind of uneventfully. One day, I saw her loading food into her handbag. A sure sign that there was someone else she was thinking of. I followed her to an alley not far from here. She and Claudia were living by a dumpster. Do you know what a "Strawberry" is?"

"A small fruit?" Amber answered simply.

Corny smiled, "That's on your side of town. On this side of town it's a woman who sells herself for drugs. Claudia was such a woman. The problem was that she was also visibly pregnant when I met her. Even the streets have limitations. No one wanted her and when I helped her into the shelter she had already gone into the first stages of withdrawal. Not a pretty sight and certainly not good situation for the baby inside her."

"Wow," Amber replied wide eyed.

"So the Army got her into a treatment facility and she's been clean ever since. Tamika's back in school and everything seemed to be going great. Then she went into premature labor. The baby was born early and his lungs were not yet developed. Claudia was released but without oxygen he could not leave the NICU. Maybelle got the call and set up the delivery she needed. Don't say anything to Claudia. I'm not allowed to tell. As far as she's concerned, the oxygen tanks drop out of heaven. Maybelle wants it that way."

Amber looked down and her knife stopped moving. "You are all too good for me. You could teach me a thing or two about what charity really is."

"Well I could," he winked at her, "but right now we have people to serve. I see the birds coming out of the oven. Evan, is this enough?"

Evan looked over, "I think so Mr C."

"Good, my back is feeling it." He stood, stretched and offered Amber a hand, "Come on AVT, your skills are needed elsewhere. Now the fun part begins."

Corny handed her a large spoon and put her in charge of creamed corn. Yuck. She stood behind the chaffing dish and scooped a spoonful onto every plate that passed by. His station was next with green beans. At first she was clumsy and corn dropped back every time. Then she got better and better. She listened to the people greet him and chat about the neighborhood. Who got a job, who slipped off the wagon, which babies were walking and the kids grades in school. One senior man held a plate up for Amber to fill. He smiled and winked.

"Hey MrC!" he said a bit too loudly as he moved down the line, "Who's this fine chickie you've brought for me? She's quite a foxy lady. Hey honey, ever taste some brown sugar?" he said as he licked his lips.

Amber nearly dropped her spoon. She really wanted to run at that moment until she heard Corny's voice, "Now, now Ronnie. Ms A is not interested in old rummies like you. What's that I smell?"

"Why that's my After shave, Mr C!" Ronnie exclaimed, "Smells like flowers."

"Smells like Ripple." He laughed, "Besides, this one belongs to me."

Oh no, she did not just hear him say that!

Her head whipped around to look at him but, he never even gave her a second glance. A voice broke into her thoughts, "Excuse me, could I please have some corn?"

"Yes, sorry."

She scooped and thought. He must have said it just to get rid of the guy. She compartmentalized this too. She couldn't think about it now.

The line got shorter and shorter. Everyone was eating and laughing when the Sergeant spoke into the microphone. "Let us all bow our heads and thank Our Lord for the food He has provided us and the company we keep." Everyone stopped and bowed their heads. Amber followed along. As the Bible reading began, the last of the food was distributed. Now came the clean up.

They moved the chaffing dishes into the kitchen as the first of the diners began their goodbyes. The trash filled up quickly with foam plates and plastic cutlery. Corny told Amber to wait for him as he

ran to give Claudia a hug and kissed the baby again. He put an arm around Tamika and spoke softly to her. They waved as they headed down the hallway to their room. The dining room was clearing out quickly. He said many good-byes and see you next weeks before he came back to her.

"Have you had enough?" he asked sincerely.

"No, lets get this finished." She smiled at him.

Amber looked around the kitchen. People were already washing the pots and pans. Ugh, she hated dishes and was greatly relieved. Corny handed her a large can of corn. "You look like Corn woman tonight." He startled at his own words, "No pun intended." He grinned, grabbed a large container of flour, "Come on, I'll show you where that goes."

She followed him into a huge storage room. "It goes with the others on the bottom shelf." He said as he pulled the rolling ladder over to where she was standing and climbed up. Amber squatted down. All the cans looked alike. She scrutinized can after can and finally found the corn. She was about to place it on the shelf when a shower of white powder cascaded down from above. It poofed onto her head.

"Whoa, that was amazing." He said with an open hand over her. "Hold still AVT, I want to see that again."

She stood and looked at herself. Flour dusted the floor. She shook her head and brushed off her arms as he climbed down, laughing all the way.

"Oh my!" he couldn't contain himself, "Are you all 'white'? Get it, are you all 'right'? All 'white'?!" He was filled with guffaws, "You look pretty goofy"

He found this hysterical. Amber wanted to burst into laughter herself, but she held her composure as she reached for the first squeeze bottle she could grasp.

"Not as goofy as you!" Suddenly, chocolate syrup caught the corner of his cheek as he dodged.

"You cannot touch me young Jedi. For I am a Jedi Master!" He said in his best Yoda voice.

She had missed but she wasn't going to miss again. She took a step forward, her shoe hit the chocolate on the floor and suddenly she did the least graceful splits he had ever seen. As she hit the ground, the look on her face was priceless. She couldn't hold it any longer and burst into hysterics. He stood over her and offered his hand.

"You okay?" he laughed as he straddled the chocolate puddle on the floor. She nodded, still giggling. He pulled her up. "I think I remember that move. Miss Teenage Hairspray 1960. You're as talented as ever."

Now she was laughing so hard she couldn't catch her breath. She bent over and fluffed her hair. Flour was everywhere. They were both still

giggling as she used her apron to clean off her face. Luckily she had been looking down and most of the mess hit the back of her head. She looked up at him.

"Wait, I got a solid hit, Master." She reached up, still smiling and used her thumb to wipe the chocolate off his cheek. She never gave it a thought as she licked it and wiped him again. She watched as his eyes darkened. He was so beautiful. Her palm touched his cheek and lingered just a second when his hand came up and held it there.

He closed his eyes and he moaned, "Don't do this to me Amber. Don't play with me."

"I'm not playing at all." She whispered.

Then his lips were on hers.

20. Chapter 20

Chapter twenty

His hands crowned her face. She tasted him, she smelled him, all the things her dreams never brought her, she reveled in now. Her hands moved up his arms and she could feel his muscles move as he caressed her. Over her hair, down her neck, down her back, his hands moved to pull her closer. His breath was short and hot as he kissed her neck. She tilted her head back as his lips met the hollow of her throat. A quiet moan escaped her as his hands loosened the shirt so neatly tucked into the back of her jeans. She shivered as his fingertips touched her bare skin and electricity ran from that touch. Her knees shook and she clung to him as his lips moved lowerâ€¦

Slowly, as if from far away, a voice was sneaking into Amber's brain. She tried to ignore it but it played continuously until she could almost hear it.

Maybelle's words sounded clearly in her thoughts, "He said you were your mother."

Horror and dread burst in with it. She put her hands square on his chest and pushed, taking two steps back as she did. "Stop!" she breathlessly exclaimed, "I can't do this!"

Her momentum continued and before she knew it she slipped back down, taking pots and pans with her. There was a loud clang and clamor that brought people running. Corny instantly turned back into slap-happy MrC.

"My friend Ms A just had a little mishap. Oooops, hon are you okay?" He pulled her up. He flashed them that Million Dollar smile. "We got into a little food fight back here. Don't worry we'll clean it up." They continued to stare, "Well what do you think we were doing in a Salvation Army storage room? Now really!" He huffed and threw his eyes to the ceiling then. started to laugh and they all joined in. She heard someone say, "Oh Mr.C, you are such a card." as they turned, going back to the duties that needed to be finished.

He leaned past her, "Bonita would you had me that bucket and mop. Hey that broom and dustpan could help too. Thanks, you're a doll"

Amber still stood in absolute shock. She wanted to go back in time ten minutes. She messed everything up.

"I'm sorry to have gone where I shouldn't have." His face was flushed but he still flashed that smile, "but you know how irresistible you can be." He began to sweep. "Now I think that calling you a cab would be the best for all concerned."

"No," she said

"Because you know AVT, I'm not really sure you quite belong down hereâ€¦" he continued without looking up.

"I'm not going anywhere without you." She said.

"You've always been kind of a Prima donna, you know and actually I think it was a mistake to take you out of your elementâ€¦" he stated as he leaned down to sweep the flour into a dustpan.

"I can't leave you." Her body started to shake.

"â€¦and really it doesn't do you any good to show you the other side of life if you don't want to change" he picked up the pots at her feet.

"I'd do it for you." Tears formed in her eyes

"So just let me get the rest of this place cleaned up and we'll get you that cab, I'll walk you out cause it's not really safeâ€¦" As he reached for a pan by her shoes a tear splashed nearby. He looked up.

She stood stoic. Her eyes were wide as she gazed past him. They were glassy with tears. "I don't think you really understand. I can't be without you. It's been too long. You've always been there, you've always been in my dreams. Now when you're gone, there are no dreams left. You won't come back and tell me that you'll never forget me because in reality, you have. When you go away from me now, you're gone. I'm not sure I can live with that." Tears streamed down her face.

He stared at her, not knowing if he heard her right. Corny knew tears, though. He knew tears of manipulation, used to get what a woman wants from a man who cares about her. He knew because he lived through them many a time. They always came with much fanfare, tons of gestures, wailing and gnashing of teeth. They didn't effect him at all

But he also knew the tears of pain. The cries of a woman at the time of a loved one's death or when she was in physical agony. They were silent tears. Like night rain on the ocean, you felt it but never heard it.

And Amber Von Tussle cried real tears.

"So why did you push me away all those years ago." He asked softly.

"Because I was wrong." Her eyes focused on him, "I didn't want to be

my mother. I thought the only way to do that was to go the feminist route. You made me lose my resolve. You made me think of myself as a woman and not a career woman. I couldn't have that. I had to push you away because I knew that if you got too close to me, I would gladly give in to you. Whatever you wanted, wherever you went, I would be there. I was told I was right, and I thought I was right, but I was wrong."

He watched her tremble and the silent tears fall from those eyes. Aw hell.

He took a step towards her and encircled her. "Come on." He sighed in surrender.

He felt all her strength leave her and she clung around his neck. She shook with sobs. She rubbed her face on his chest. "Now since you made it real," she whispered, "Please don't take it away."

He kissed the top of her head and held her a minute longer, "Okay, we can't talk here." He grasped her arms and pushed her back. "Amber look at me." He held her face and looked in her eyes. "I have to clean this up. That will give you time to get yourself together. Can you do that for me? You have to look really happy walking out of here or people will stop us. They'll be concerned. That's just how they are"

She nodded and he wiped her tears with his thumbs, then kissed her on the forehead. "Sit over there and I'll do this. The rest of the work should be done and we can go, alright."

He grabbed the mop and cleaned up the chocolate. He was sure wanted this, but he wasn't sure he was ready for it. At all.

21. Chapter 21

Chapter twenty-one

They waved their good-byes to the other workers and he helped her into the van. She was quiet.

"Are you okay?" he asked without looking.

"I'm good" she said softly. "Where are we going?" He heard her ask

"I'm not really sure. Your place is out. People will see us coming in. Want to see my digs?" he smiled, "They're pretty humble."

"Yes, that sounds great." She said with a gentle smile.

His hand reached out for hers and she took it. Her hands were soft and delicate. He always noticed that about her. For all the strength that this woman had, her body seemed as fragile as a flower. He remembered when she danced, her movements were more ballet than pop. Her hands took the same shape, fingers perpendicular to the thumb with the index and pinky slightly higher, every time. Now he held that hand, and in some ways he couldn't believe it. How many times did he have to hold his hormones in check twenty years ago? Biting his lip and looking away. He constantly denied, it even to himself,

but she was always there. And now she was here.

They rolled on to one of the working class suburbs. He pulled up in front of a small house. She smiled, he was right, this was pretty humble.

He opened the door and waved her in. She looked around. There really wasn't much. A couch, a chair, a tv, a coffee table filled with junk. He followed the direction of her glance and started to snatch the magazines off the table.

"I really wasn't expecting company." He grinned. Did she see the expose that Time did of her? She wasn't going to look. She felt like she was invading on his privacy.

"Your house is very nice. How is it that you own it and yet no one finds you here?" she asked.

'You know, the cliché, 'He was a quiet guy, never bothered anyone'? That's me. I keep to myself, mow the lawn and keep the place up. It's not hard."

"But wouldn't people be able to find you through tax records? You have to pay property taxes."

"Not really, I don't own anything. Maybelle owns it all."

Amber looked puzzled.

"Come on and sit down." He motioned to the couch, "Can I get you something? I could use coffee, how about you?"

She seemed to relax for the first time. "Oh that would be great."

He scurried to the kitchen and she studied the room. She tried to find something that would bring it all together but there was nothing there. Lots of sheet music, a prayer book, a black rosary and extra glasses on the end table. Pictures of Maybelle, Inez at her wedding, Seaweed, Penny and all the kids on the tv. He was an invisible member of the family. He knew everything that went on with them. She wondered what he knew about her. Maybelle said he watched her, but there really wasn't much to watch. No steamy love affairs or unexpected babies. She was successful but boring. She thought about the article she did for Redbook, all dressed up in workout clothes like Olivia Newton-John. That one even made her cringe. Did he laugh when he looked at it?

He bounded back in and took a seat on the leather chair. "How about if we start from the beginning." He smiled at her, "This is off the record, right AVT?"

She smiled, "Cross my heart."

"Okay", he began. "The whole deal in California was bad from the beginning. I didn't belong there. I had become someone I didn't know. Someone I didn't care to be. So I took off. First I kind of wandered. I had about 200 in my pocket which got me food and that was about it. I sat in a café in Vegas and stared out the window when a bunch of sailors came in. They seemed happy and cheerful. The sea called me. I hopped a bus and went to San Diego. There I joined the Merchant

Marines."

That made sense to Amber, he had lived around docks all his life. She remember that he had even worked the docks during his summers in college. This would be right.

"I was pretty happy too. No one knew me, no one cared about my life. We worked hard, drank hard and partied like real men. And it was great. I thought I would live like that until my body gave out, then move to an Island and sit in the sun. It all looked planned out." He paused, "Oh the coffee, sit tight here a second. Cream, sugar?"

"No black is fine."

He returned quickly and placed the cups on the table. "I'm a black and sweet man. I think that's why Maybelle and I get along." He joked.

"Anyway, did you know that after seven years, if no one knows where you are, you can be declared legally dead?" Yes. She remembered when she read that story about him. She drank herself into a stupor and cried. That moron that she was seeing had no sympathy. He was soon out of her life as well.

She nodded as she sipped her coffee and he continued, "My slimy brother knew it. I think he circled the days on the calendar, counting down til he could get my cash." Suddenly he threw his head back and let out a hearty laugh, "I would have LOVED to have been a fly on the wall when that will was read. Everything I had was willed to Maybelle!! He got a cheap watch, an eight year old Jaguar with years of storage fees and my photo albums. He paid the attorney and she got it all. Isn't that a hoot!"

She had to laugh herself. Revenge can be sweet.

"So Maybelle got all the cash but she never believed that I was dead. I don't think that anyone of worth really believed it any way. She was there with me during the worst times and she knew that I would make it through. Let me tell you AVT, she is a financial whiz. She took the money she got and invested it. It grew by leaps and bounds. With the money I saved overseas and the money she invested, I'm pretty well set. She saw to that. She keeps it all in her name for my anonymity and I owe her everything."

Right at this moment, Amber felt like she owed her everything too. Maybelle was the pillar in everyone's lives.

"She loves you so much. And Corny, please don't think she told me where you were." Amber pleaded, "Trust me, she hinted, but she never told."

His eyes twinkled at her, "Oh I know what Maybelle wants for me. I'm sure she gave a pretty easy clue."

"Once I caught on it was easy," she cried, "Seems I was a little dense."

He smiled, "I'm sure I would be too. Ghosts don't often come back."

"I didn't want you to be a ghost. You were always alive to me."

His face grew serious, "Same hereâ€¦" he shook it away and continued.

"Few years ago I was in Japan. I saw a newspaper and there was a picture of Maybelle. I never knew what the article was about. Suddenly I wanted to see her more than anything. My time with the Marines was ending and instead of signing up again, I took the next boat back home. When I arrived on her doorstep she squeaked and squealed. She kissed me and hugged me and nearly smothered me. But I didn't mind at all. I was home."

She knew exactly what that was like. Maybelle could hug like no other. Her house filled with children and joy was the home she never had. .

"She started making calls but I put a quick stop to it. I wanted to see her, not all of Baltimore. At first, she was insistent but I told her I would be gone as quickly as I came if she pushed the issue. She knew I meant it. The rest is history."

She contemplated her coffee cup for a minute. "Corny, did you ever think of calling me?" she asked without looking up.

"No, never."

She looked disappointed.

He got up and sat next to her on the couch. "You were totally unapproachable. When I tried to talk to you, you could cut the atmosphere with a knife. I saw nothing but distain from you." He stated honestly.

She knew he was right.

"I was stuck with you though" he said as he looked down at his hands, "I didn't realize it for a while. I just always seemed to like the petite blondes. Once I was in port with a lady I was seeing. We had written for a while and I really thought we were getting serious. We were at her apartment and one thing led to another, you know. She whispered how much she loved when I touched her and I moaned back. Then suddenly she pushed me onto the floor! 'Who the hell is Amber!!!!' she yelled at me."

Amber gasped.

"Yeah, it really kind of busted that romantic mood." He laughed, "I had to look at the whole situation at that point. I had been in denial for too long. I realized that I held every woman to your standard, but none of them could quite live up to it. There was only one Amber Von Tussle. Others paled in comparison."

"Thank you." She whispered.

"No, there is no reason to thank me," he said as he stared deeply into her eyes, "You got me through the tough times without even knowing it. Your quiet resolve when you came to the studio that night was totally different than you had been before. Honestly, you shocked me. I saw you as separate from your mother and I liked it. I really

wanted to get to know the person you had become, but you always waved me away. It didn't matter though, You were there in the back of my mind or in the papers in front of my face. .Even your fundraiser for the shelter got me to volunteer there. When I saw you on tv, standing with those families in need, I thought that it would do me good to be with people more miserable than myself. I went there hoping to help and helping them made me feel whole."

He paused, "I would be lost without you. You were there all the time"

There was not an ounce of humor in his voice. He was deadly serious.

22. Chapter 22

Happy Thanksgiving everyone. I'm so grateful for all my reviewers, here's an extra chapter for the holiday._

Chapter twenty-two

She was dizzy and her head was spinning. Was he really saying all this? For a second she was sure she would wake up. She would look around her pale pink room and cry, like she always did when her dreams were over. But she could feel him much more vividly than any dream and when she touched him, he was really there. His eyes were bluer, his lips fuller, his voice deeper, than any dream. She threw her arms around him and from the depths of her soul she cried.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I was so stupid, I'm sorryâ€|â€|."

Her words ended when his lips covered hers. He was slow and precise. His hand gently traveled down her back, and around to encircling her breast She wanted so badly to give in. She wanted him more than she had ever wanted any man. To make him moan and shiver at the height of passion. But she broke away from the kiss and looked into his eyes.

"I can't. I want to but I can't." she said breathlessly.

He looked at her, flustered and confused. "Is there someone else? Are you seeing someone else? Just tell me now."

"No, not at all. It's my mother."

He furrowed his eyebrows, "Your mother wouldn't like this or what? I thought she wasn't much able to be offended by anyone?"

"Corny, you said it, Maybelle said it. You think I'm my mother."

He grinned and shook his head, "No I don't."

"Yes you do." She said, "You said it yourself, you thought that I was coming to you to screw you, to get you on that show. Maybelle told me too."

He seemed embarrassed by the truth she told.

"Butâ€|â€|" he tried to interrupt but she placed her fingers on his

lips.

"If we do this now, you'll never know for sure that I did not come here for any other reason, The doubt will always been in your mind. I'm not here because I want to control you or ruin your life. I'm here because I never want to be without you again. Television be damned." She took a deep breath. "I'll do anything you ask me, but I have to ask you to do this for me. You waited twenty years for me. You can't wait eight weeks more? It isn't forever, but it's what I need." She looked to him for approval.

Somehow he actually understood what she was saying. Even though his body ached for her and he was having problems holding himself back even as she spoke, he could see the angle she was coming from. He had to agree. This was what she wanted so it was what he would do.

He leaned back and took a breath, "So the deal's done. No touchie, no feelie until after this show is over?"

She beamed. "How about a compromise? Touchie but no feelie. I'd like that."

"Now you're talking! Cozy on up here then little lady. We'll touchie for a while." She snuggled into him and he put an arm around her. She was overtaken with nostalgia, he smelled exactly the same. He reached over and pulled an afghan from the back of the couch over the both of them, cocooning them in warmth. He kissed her head as she drifted off in contented sleep.

Then said a silent prayer of thanks. He tried not to ask for this but God knew better than he did. He felt more complete than he had his entire life.

It seemed like minutes later when the sun was beaming in Amber's face. She felt his body under her and she reached up to caress his unshaven cheek. It hadn't been a dream

He was always smooth and freshly shaven when he came to her at night. But the whiskers made her tingle. This is what it meant to wake up to a man. Not magazine perfect, but rather just as he was. She smiled. He was there, really. And so was she, in his house, on this bright Monday morning.

MONDAY!! Oh man! She had a stockholders meeting at 10:00! What time was it? He felt her bolt up and he grasped her wrist, "Amber, don't go." He said in a panic.

"I have to find a clock!" she cried, "I have to go to work!"

He bolted into the kitchen and yelled out, "It's 7:45."

She felt a wave of relief sweep over her. She hadn't missed it afterall. But she needed to move quickly to make it back home, shower, dress, get her notes and get downtown.

"Geez Baby, you're shaking," he observed, "Come on over here a sec." He wrapped her in his arms. She sighed. She would have been perfectly happy to stay there. She closed her eyes and wished for the world to go away.

"Can't you call in?' He asked as he tilted her chin, "I want to keep you a while." He kissed her and she couldn't help but return it. Then reality broke in.

"I have to talk to the Stockholders." She insisted as she pulled back. "They want a report on the reunion and everyone is counting on me."

He stepped back, "And what will you say about the search for Corny Collins?" he quizzed.

"Same as always, people are searching, we are not giving up." She smiled, "but if I DON'T make it, where do you think they will find me when they call out the dogs? Right here in your arms. Then your cover is blown, Mr C. You wouldn't like that. Now would you?"

He didn't have to ponder it long. "Just give me a minute to get myself together and we'll go." He looked down and played with the buttons on her shirt, "When will I see you again Amber?" he said without looking up.

"When do you want to see me again?" she asked coyly.

He smiled, "Every moment of every day."

23. Chapter 23

Chapter twenty-three

Millie was holding out message notes as she flew in. "Ms Von Tussle, Mrs. Stubbs is trying to find you. She says it's important."

"Call her back and tell her that I will get with her around noon." Amber replied, "Millie are the charts up from graphics? Good. I'll be with the stockholders." Then an idea tickled her brain. "Millie, what does my schedule look like for this afternoon?"

Millie flipped the appointment book. "Pretty full, Ma'am. I had to reschedule on Friday."

"Work your magic Millie. See if you can clear out two o'clock on. I know you can do it." Amber smiled, "I'll bring you a cookieâ€|â€|"

Millie looked down and shook her head with a grin. The woman was a handful but Millie felt she had the best job on earth. She had heard over and over how difficult she could be. Millie never saw it.

"I'll see what I can do." Millie stated, "And it's Oatmeal Raisin, remember?"

"Oh I remember hon." Amber yelled back as she headed to the elevator.

The stockholder's meeting was full of kudos but also questions. What is the progress of the search for Corny Collins? What is the plan if he isn't found? Had she gotten with the IRS? The FBI? Amber had to chuckle at the irony of the situation. She held her tongue and smiled. "Ladies and Gentlemen, this show will blow our sweeps numbers

out of the water, with Corny Collins or not. We are trying our best, but with or without him, we are a go. Did anyone see the article in TV Guide?" She asked as she picked up the magazine.

"Will you perform, Ms Von Tussle?" The question came from a grey streaked lady in the back. Mrs. Brown had been a fan back in the 60's. She told Amber when she first met her that she knew every dance ever done on the show. Amber had grabbed her hand and the two did the Mashed Potato together. The woman beamed.

"It's planned that I will be introduced. I'm not going to dance if I can help it. Old war injury, you know." She grabbed her back and the room chuckled.

"Now if there is nothing else, I have a station to run and a show to produce. Thank you all for your time." Amber grabbed an Oatmeal Raisin cookie from the snack table. She paused and grabbed a few. She needed Millie to be happy. She needed to get back to him.

It was 11:30 when she dropped the cookies on Millie's desk. The girl had cleared her calendar until 1:30. Amber couldn't help but hug her. She was giddy. Millie gave her a strange look. "Millie, when I leave today, go shopping." Amber grabbed her purse and flipped a card at her. "Use the corporate card and I'll cover it. You deserve it. Get yourself a nice dress or something."

"Thanks Ms!" Millie said as cookie crumbs spewed from her mouth, "Oh and Mrs. Stubbs needs to talk to you. She threatened to come here if you didn't call her by noon."

"I'm there Millie." And Amber closed her door. She reached back into her purse and pulled out a small piece of paper. He had scribbled his number and palmed it to her when he shook her hand outside her apartment building.

"No kisses here, corporate woman." He smiled, "That doorman has his eye on you. Call me later?"

She stuffed it in her pocket, "Yes." Then she waved good-bye as she ran through the door.

She opened the paper and looked at the number. It ended with small heart. And hers melted. She dialed the number but there was no answer. She was more than a little disappointed. She then dialed Maybelle's. Nina picked up.

"Maybelle Stubbs residence." Nina chimed, "May I help you?"

"Nina, I need to speak with Maybelle, is she available?"

"Oh, ma'am, she's been waiting for you. One minute please."

Amber waited and suddenly Maybelle's voice burst through the phone, "Child! I've been calling you all night, right into the morning. Where have you been? What do you have to tell me?"

Amber smiled, "Maybelle, your baby brother says, "Hello"

The whoops and hollers rang through the receiver.

24. Chapter 24

Chapter twenty-four

Always the professional, she spoke with person after person all morning. She was polite but hurried, apologizing to each one stating that she had been running behind but would meet any need she could. Her mind drifted a few times, reliving his touch and the feel of his arms around her, but then she would snap back to the matter at hand. She glanced at the clock. This was her last appointment. Then onto Maybelle's. She couldn't wait, she was busting at the seams and needed to tell someone. Maybelle was the only one to tell and she was thrilled.

She pulled out the paper and dialed the phone. No answer again. Amber broke into a sweat. Was it the right number? Did he fool her on purpose? She couldn't think about it right now. She had to get to Maybelle.

The parking garage was dimly lit and people bustled past her returning from lunch. A few waved and a few said polite greetings. She was still Amber Von Tussle, Station Manager, so she smiled and responded as she trotted by. She looked for her car. A dark figure stood by it. Oh great, this was all she needed. Panhandler or reporter, she didn't want to be bothered. She was about to call security when he peeped out from under his Orioles cap. Those eyes, that smile. She quickened her pace.

"Busy, busy, busy. I thought I might be here all day." He grinned.

She grabbed his hand and stepped into the shadows. He was warm and soft. She pulled him to her and was lost in his embrace. "I couldn't wait. I just couldn't wait." He whispered into her ear as he kissed it.

"I tried to call you but you weren't there. I thought you may haveâ€¦|.."

"Left you high and dry?" he interrupted, "You're not going to get rid of me that easily. Come on."

"I have to go to Maybelle's. She's about ready to burst. Want to join me?" she asked apprehensively.

"Will I find any surprises there?" he asked as they moved toward the car.

"No, only Nina. She said Inez is actually down here working on the show."

He looked around. "Okay let's go."

She unlocked his door and ran to the driver's side. Thank God for tinted windows. She pulled him to her and kissed him for all she was worth. "I'm so glad you're here. You're better than lunch."

He smiled and flipped on sunglasses. "Young Jedi, we have a mission. Drive."

She slid the car into gear and sped off.

At Maybelle's, Nina greeted them with a puzzled smile. She led them to the sunroom. Amber stepped in first. "Girl, you need to get on over here. I've been waiting all night." She said as she stood.

Corny stepped in behind her, still grasping her hand. Maybelle danced over to him, "Baby," she cooed, "well things are just right now aren't they. Lord, be praised!"

"Hey sis" he said as he hugged her, "You sly old girl. I look out from the Pulpit on Sunday and what do I see? Not my biggest fan, my big sister but this little sprite. You just couldn't hold it could you."

"Oh I did" she cried, "You tell him Amber. As God is my witness, I never told her EXACTLY where you were. Now I may have dropped a hint or two, butâ€¦".

"It's okay, Lady. You always knew better than I did anyway." He whispered as he kissed her cheek. "How are your counts? Didn't you see the doctor on Thursday?"

"They're great! The doctors are telling me to be cautiously optimistic but they are extremely hopeful. They think that this remission will hold. In the name of Jesus, Amen." She beamed. "And you Baby Brother, how are you?" she said as she looked at Amber. "Busy last night?"

"Why yes." He said as he shot Amber a glance, "You know I wouldn't miss Sunday with my pals. We had a new recruit. She can shovel food like the best of them." He said as his thumb pointed her way, "Just a small mishap with some flour but she made it through. Hey, Claudia's baby is doing great. Thanks sis, he's a good strong boy. He'll be fine since you sent the oxygen. You're an angel."

"I'm just looking to spread it around," she plopped back into her chair. "Now come on over here and we'll set a spell. Nina!" she called out. "Can you get me some of those cakes you baked today, "Maybelle leaned in, "She makes me Portugese Sweet cakes, they'll melt in your mouth.. And some tea Nina, if you please."

Nina scurried off and they were munching and talking for hours. They laughed and reminisced. Maybelle told Corny that Seaweed was spending so much time in Baltimore that the family was moving back, she was thrilled. This whole world was getting better for everyone. She winked at him and he nodded. She hadn't seen him this happy in years. She saw the way her looked at the small blonde, the way his hand would always gravitate back to hers. The sparkle in her eye when he spoke. Oh yeah, the world was suddenly a whole better place.

"Maybelle, do you remember the time Brad switched all the girls cold cream with Mayo" he laughed. "I've never seen so many fingernails fly."

They all busted up. "Oh I thought for sure that boy wouldn't make it out of the studio with his eyes intact!!" They were laughing so hard

they didn't hear the front door slam. Heels clicked down the hallway.

"Momma, I need that music I left here yesterday and have you seen Amber? Millie said she took the afternoon off but she isn't answering her phone. We could use her down atâ€|â€|â€|" Inez stopped and fell back against the wall. Corny slowly stood up and Amber felt faint.

Her eyes were like saucers. "Well I'll be damned. I WILL be damned. Amber, you found him." She gasped, "Corny Collins. Where in God's name have you been?"

25. Chapter 25

Thank you so much to everyone who is sticking with this...I am so grateful!

Chapter Twenty-Five

Inez talked faster than Amber had ever heard her. "You look fine, Man! Just fine. I'm so glad you're here. Did Momma show you my babies? Seaweed and Penny's too. Oh this is going to be such a joyful reunion. I never thought I'd see the day. Come on, come on, give me a hug. Dead man walkin' Thank you, Jesus Corny's come homeâ€|â€|."

He hugged her with gusto but Amber saw that fake smile he was so good at. "Goodness little girl, you sure have grown." He interjected, "I'm just here catching up with Ms Amber and your mother. Why don't you sit down. Sweet Cake?"

"No, no, no. I have to get back." She put up a hand, "but now you can come with me and see The Council. Amber why didn't you bring him down. Everyone will be dying to see you."

He looked flustered. "But Inezâ€|" he began.

"I'm not taking no for an answer. You'll have so much to catch up on. The cues, the music. Oh I just can't believe we found you. I can't believe you're here. I have toâ€|."

Maybelle's voice broke in, deep and commanding. "Inez, you need to give us a minute. Run and get some more tea in this pitcher."

"Nina can do it" Inez argued, "I just want toâ€|.."

"Now Inez!" Something in the tone made Inez grab the pitcher and scurry off. Looking none too happy either.

Amber wanted to slide under the table. She felt like a little girl about to chastised by her father. Corny looked at her. There was anger in his eyes.

"You put that evil look right back where you found it Mister." Maybelle growled, "She had nothing to do with this. It's my fault that the music was left after dinner yesterday. I didn't expect Inez. She was at that studio and I said she was at that studio. This girl knew nothing else."

He looked back at her. She was terrified. Would this be the end? Would he be gone again?

"Amber you need to visit the ladies room. You look like you're gonna be ill." Maybelle ordered, "This man and I need to have a talk."

She looked down and headed off, taking the back hall away from the kitchen. She closed the bathroom door and felt dead. She sat down on the toilet and wanted to cry but no tears would come. She didn't feel sad, she felt devastated. It came too easy and it was too good. Easy things are just as easily gone. She knew that all her life. Right now, she didn't care about that show, her career, Inez, Maybelle, nothing. Nothing but him. If he needed to be gone, she was gone too. If he could ghost it, so could she. Her life was just beginning with him and no one, absolutely no one was screwing that up. Her resolve began to grow. She would strut out there like the Amber Von Tussle who commanded such respect in the business world, grab his hand and walk out. No matter how wonderful these people had been to her, it didn't matter right now. She had to get him, get him out and not look back. Or she would lose him forever.

A knock on the door made her jump, "Yes." She quietly replied.

"Amber can I talk to you?" It was Inez.

She had to face her. She opened the door and stared into the face of the best friend she had in years. She expected her to be angry, but Inez, being Inez looked more curious than mad.

"Why didn't you call me Amber?" she asked, "Why didn't you tell me that you found him?"

"I couldn't." she replied.

Inez looked at her shocked, "Why of course you could. You could have just dialed that phone without a single thought. When did this happen? This morning?"

"No yesterday."

"And all this time you couldn't call me up and share the news? You could have brought him for dinner. Momma's big Sunday dinner. Everyone could have gotten a chance to talk to him. It would have been great."

Amber didn't know what to say to her. How much of his relationship with Maybelle could she reveal? How much of her own? She needed to take a chance, to plead to this lady who said that she loved her like a sister. She had to understand.

"I didn't want to call you, Inez. We were busy. We spent the night together last night."

Inez leaned back and her hands flew up to her face. "Oh go on, girl. You did not."

Amber genuinely smiled and nodded.

Inez squealed and hugged her hard. "So Momma was right about

everything, wasn't she? Damn that man moves fast." She whispered in her ear, "Was he as good as we all thought?"

Amber opened her mouth to answer when the voice bellowed, "Inez Stubbs-Franklin! Your Momma needs to see you now."

She turned her head, "Coming Momma!" she turned back to Amber, "You will tell me everything when I get back. Hold tight and let me see what's going on"

Amber saw her take off. She was tempted to follow but Maybelle called the shots. When they wanted her, she would be there.

And somehow she hoped they would make it right. She looked at herself in a mirror. Thirty-eight really didn't look too bad on her. She was fit and took good care of herself. Maybe a baby would ruin that figure. Naw, it didn't ruin Inez's figure and she wasn't too much younger. Would he still love her with a baby in her arms? She giggled like a schoolgirl. Weren't these the same dreams she had 20 years ago? But the question was, did he dream the same dreams? Would he even be sitting there when she walked out?

Nina came to the door and broke into her thoughts. "Excuse me Ma'ma. Miss Maybelle would like to see you now."

She made it down the hall and braced herself for the fact that he might not be there. But he was. He was much more relaxed.

"Amber, do you plan on coming to my Labor Day Picnic?" Maybelle asked.

"Yes" Amber replied puzzled.

"Good, we have come to a compromise. This man will not concede to be on your show. He wants nothing of the spotlight any more. However, our family deserves to have time with our own. Please escort him that day. Corny Collins is coming home."

He smiled. Relief washed over her. He wasn't hiding any more.

26. Chapter 26

It's almost over, I swear

Now, who's working on the Hairspray/Enchanted crossover?

Tracy?

Chapter Twenty-Six

Amber put the top down on her TR8. It was a hot, beautiful night and she felt like she was flying anyway so why not let the wind whip through her hair. The car purred as it sped down the highway.

She looked over at him as the street lights illuminated his face. First shadow then light. He seemed to be lost in his own thoughts and

she didn't mind at all. As long as he was beside her, she did mind at all.

Inez had stayed for a few minutes. Calls began to flood in from people looking for her. She bounced like a child with every one, crying how she didn't want to go. She stated simply that this was going to be the hardest week of her life. Until that party on Monday, she had to be silent about Corny's return. It was agreed for all to see him at the party. It would be a welcome surprise. There wasn't an available Council member that would not be there. Even Link was flying in. This party had become an annual event, with friends from all over all over the country staying around town. Maybelle's house was packed with families, Inez took in a couple and the rest of the out-of-towners stayed with friends or Maybelle paid for hotel rooms. It truly was a huge, but private event. Security was always hired, for privacy mattered. That must have been why he conceded, Amber thought. No one but those specifically invited would be speaking to Corny Collins. Maybelle would see to that.

Amber promised that she would be in for her scheduled day of rehearsal and waved as Inez left. Inez peeped her head in one more time and pointed to Amber and mouthed, "You call me" as she put a receiver made from her hand up to her ear. Amber smiled and nodded. She blew Amber a kiss and was gone.

She just had to know what was said. Why this decision?

She looked over at him, "Are you ready to talk?"

He looked over, "Hm?"

"What did Maybelle say to you?" she asked simply.

"That Inez has a big mouth," he grinned, "She can't hold a secret for all she's worth."

Amber squirmed. Hopefully she can contain herself about that little talk they had in the bathroom. Amber's eyes rolled up and her lids closed momentarily.

"If we continued the way we were, Inez would have every person in the city looking for me. I didn't want that. I want this on my terms." He continued, "The best bet was to go public but swear everyone to secrecy. You actually got that in their contracts, so I heard."

"That's right, there's a confidentiality clause." She smiled, "They're not allowed to discuss the show with anyone." Amber high fived herself in her own brain. "More than that, when Maybelle speaks, people listen. That's how it was when I came in. Not an unkind word was said to me. Maybelle made sure of it."

"I heard about it." He replied, "We're all adults. We were younger then. It would be stupid to carry a grudge for twenty years."

She smiled. Some of us carried things for twenty years and she was glad.

"But seriously," she continued, "What happens after the show? When that clause means nothing. When people go home and they begin to

talk? It's pretty big, Corny. You've become like D. B. Cooper. People want to know where you are."

He paused, "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

There was a silence between them.

"And what about me?" she asked.

"What?" he turned to her.

"What will be said about me? About you and me? After this is all over, I am still in the spotlight. I'm watched. They write about me in the papers. My dresses, my shoes, stupid things. Don't you think that the press is going to wonder about this man who shows up in an old ratty van every day at my place?"

He grinned, "It's not ratty."

"Corny, I'm serious. How do we handle this? Your whole cover may be blown. Are you ready for that?" she asked apprehensively.

Suddenly he stood and stuck his head out of the top of the car. "Hey there, Baltimore!" he yelled, "I am in this car with Amber Von Tussle, Station Manager extraordinaire! If anyone wants to know who I am, you can just bite me. Got it?" He looked over to a woman staring at him from the next car. He waved. "Hi!" She sheepishly waved back.

"Corny get down," Amber pleaded, "Please."

He plopped back "There, that should cover it." He quipped.

"Oh yeah, that'll do it." She giggled. Then she grew serious. "I need to know. What do you want me to be to you at that Labor Day party?"

"Beautiful?" he smiled and gazed at her, "That won't be hard."

She blushed. "Stop it, I'm serious. What is the role you want me to play? Business manager? Old friend? Bitch that you never wanted to see again? Who am I going to be? Because I have no problem upholding your persona. If you don't want those people to connect us, I can make that happen." She said.

> "That is if Inez can button her lips." She added under her breath.<p>

He was silent for a moment. "What do you want to be?"

"It doesn't matter what I want." She said honestly. "It's what you need."

"So if you left it up to me, and I ignored you, what would you think?" He asked.

"I would accept it."

"And if I snatched you up, threw you onto Maybelle's kitchen table and ravaged you passionately until you screamed, right in the middle of that party, what would you think?"

She stared at him incredulously.

"Amber watch the road," he pointed, "Okay, that one's out."

She shook her head.

He grabbed her hand, "Well, let me tell you, I did a lot of thinking while I was waiting for you this morning." He kissed it and looked up at her, "All those LONG hours by your car."

"You're a nut." She muttered.

"I know, but seriously, I did do some searching this morning. I thought about the whole reason why I wasn't with Maybelle and the family. Why I had dropped out and what it all meant. I realized something. When I first left, I was running away from the person I was, but as time went on, I was a new person. When I came back here, I still wanted to hide. Then it hit me, I wasn't hiding from what I used to be but rather what I didn't have. I was so afraid to walk into Maybelle's one day and find you there. She talked about you, and how Inez admired you. One day I may walk in there, find you and have you blow me off again. It ate away at me."

She squeezed his hand and he reciprocated.

"Amber, can you stand in front of those people and be by my side proudly?" he quizzed.

"Of course!" she exclaimed. Good God, she got the big prize. She could have easily gotten some twenty year old digs in about this, but he was correct, she had to be adult about it. Just being with him brought its own satisfaction from some old grudges.

"Then I will be there. And proudly call you my own." He leaned in and kissed her cheek. "Although it's gonna be a lot easier to get in to stand proudly next to you now since you've ditched those crinolines."

She laughed out loud, "Oh you've got that right!"

"But Baby, I need you to understand something." He got serious. "I don't want to be Corny Collins big showy media sap anymore. I like who I am. I'll find a way to stay in the shadows, as long as those shadows belong to you."

"Fair enough" she agreed.

"And we'll work on that ravaging part later." He added.

Amber began to think that she should have scheduled this show for a season opener. A September premiere would have gotten her ravaged much sooner.

27. Chapter 27

Chapter Twenty-Seven Labor Day

She was up before dawn. She showered and maneuvered into a new

sundress and sandals. She wanted to look pretty for him. She giggled. She liked having him to please. She had been on that couch way too long last night. She really pushed her own envelope. He seemed to have much more resolve to this waiting deal than she had. Just when she was ready to give it all up, he gently pushed her away.

"Ah, ah, ah. No feelie," he proclaimed. "Come on, you have to go." He kissed her quickly and stood, "We have a big day tomorrow. Are you ready for this?"

She sat a minute with her mouth open. Damn, why did she ever say that? Screw the party. Screw the show. She wanted him more every second. Just Damn.

"I guess." She said as she stood and put her arms around him. "Can't we forget it and just stay here?"

"After Inez was such a good girl, she would kill you." He grinned, "Maybelle too. You don't want her wrath on you, God Knows!"

Poor Inez. Maybelle had threatened her with death, dismemberment and all the demons of Hell down on her head if she breathed a word of this. Amber spoke to her on the phone. After feeling her out as to what her Momma had told her about her "baby brother" Amber lied and said that an anonymous tip had come in that she checked herself. It panned out. Then she just quietly asked, sister to sister if their conversation could be kept between themselves.

"Girl, you are gonna kill me" Inez cried. But she kept her word. Hard as it was, she kept her word.

Amber took a deep breath and let it out slowly. This day was going to be filled with excitement. She would stand beside him as if she were attached to his hip. He needed support and she would be there. They wanted to get there early so as not to make a "Grand Entrance" like the Prom King and Queen. Just be there when they started to arrive. Like he had always been there. Like they belonged.

The buzzer rang and Amber ran to the intercom, "Yes"

"Ms. Von Tussle, Mr. Cornelius has arrived."

"Send him up." She smiled, a bit early there, Mr. C. she thought. She turned and checked herself in the hall mirror and was satisfied. She primed her blonde curls, then peeped her head out the door.

The doors to the elevator opened and he made his way to her. He swooped her up in his arms. "Baby you look good, you smell good, bet you taste good." And he nibbled at her neck.

"Hmmm, bet you do too." She drawled tilting her head back, "But right now we have places to go and people to see. Are you ready for this Jedi Master?"

"Is the Millenium Falcon ready?"

"Wait, I want to be Leia. How do you think I would look in Space Puffs?" her hands cupped her ears.

"Didn't you hear? Luke is her brother, so that Jedi is out. I do like

that Han Solo though. Unless I need to be Yoda"

A little smack landed on her posterior and she yelped dramatically. "Hey now!" she cried, "That's a soft spot."

"I know Honey. Oh yeah, I know." He gazed at her a second, "Come on, lets go. Can I drive the 'Falcon'?"

Little sports cars can go pretty fast when the drivers are determined. He depressed the clutch and slammed gearshift lever into fourth. "Wow, I am lovin' this. Beats the hell out of that junker van I drive any day." He exclaimed.

"So, you're just with me for my ride?" she asked in mock horror.

"Well maybeâ€¦" he winked at her. "but the aftermarket accessory in the passenger side makes it all complete." He glanced in the rearview mirror. "All we need are cherries at this point, I better slow this baby down."

"Hey, the guy who sold me this thing got me onto the test track." She said proudly, "I took it to 120."

"Wooooooo!" he exclaimed, "I got to get me a piece of that. How about after I get a piece of yâ€¦â€¦crap, there's our exit." He suddenly hit the brakes and swerved to the right lane.

"You are going to kill me." She cried as she grabbed the dash, "and trash my car."

"Faith! You've gotta have some faith." He preached, "I was driving Sports Cars when you were in Kindergarten. Baby I got it down."

"Come on, Kindergarten?"

"Okay, okay. But a long, long time." They pulled up in front of Maybelle's house. No one was there. Not a car in the drive. Only the security van.

"Let's get in there before anyone else." He flipped her the keys, "You better take these. I might just get used to it."

"You can have it. I'll get another." She shrugged.

"Oh stop that bragging. You're such a show offâ€¦.lets go." She couldn't help but notice the happiness that emoted from him. He WAS coming home.

They met with security and Amber showed her id. The guard looked down the list. "Amber Von Tussle and guest. Right here ma'am" He opened the door for them, "Right this way."

They made their way down the hallway. Amber could hear Penny, "Grammay wants those chairs over by her Hon. I'll get this salad outsideâ€¦." Suddenly the bowl smashed to the floor. "Corny!" she squeaked, "Oh my God." She ran into his arms pushing Amber aside. "What? How? Amber how didâ€¦?" her words ran together.

He smiled through the hug. "Oh Penny, you look great. Haven't changed a bit."

Seaweed stood with his hands on his hips, mouth open at the far end of the hall. He looked to his wife and his eyes grew wide. "Corny Collins, you old dog."

Corny beamed.

28. Chapter 28

Chapter Twenty-eight

The tv played old kinescopes transferred onto video tapes. Amber had to laugh at the hairstyles and clothes. How did she ever move in those dresses? She watched herself do a spin and her girth expanded five feet. Wonder that anyone could dance with her.

Inez watched the screen then looked at him. "Corny, you should shave that facial hair. It hides your beautiful face."

"That's the idea, sweetie," he smiled and put an arm around her.

"Suit yourself, Mr. Man. I'd know you anywhere."

The sound of Corny's voice rang through the room from the tape. As people came in, it softened the surprise. The "girls" screamed, the "boys" hollered, but everyone was breathlessly excited to see him. Now he was the King of the Court, sitting next to Maybelle, he stood and embraced every one. The same questions were heard thousands of times. "Where have you been? What have you been doing?" and simple "What's up, Man?" He answered with an honest, "Oh I've been around." Then gracefully asked, "And what about you? What have you been up to?" People loved to talk about themselves. Amber was amazed at his skill in changing the subject.

Tracy bounced up and down when she saw him. "Oh Corny, I just missed you so much. Here meet my kids" she pushed her daughters toward him. "Come on girls. Say hello"

"Goodness Tracy, they're marvelous." He squatted down by the girls. "Now how did you two get so pretty? They giggled. "How old are you girls?"

"They're eight and ten. They're good girls, smart too. Say hi girls." She insisted.

"Hi." They both chimed together. Their heads turned. The older girl waved to a child outside.

"Go on you two" Corny said, "Go see your friends. Your mom and I will be right here."

The girls ran off. Tracy beamed. "So where were you? Who got you here."

He put an arm around Amber standing next to him. "This one. Worked some magic. Now I'm under her spell. She hexed me, Tracy." He pulled

her in tighter and kissed her head.

Tracy's head dipped down and she looked up with a sly grin. "Well we called you a witchâ€|â€|with a 'B'" she said as she grinned at Amber. Then she hugged her hard. "But your magic got him here. Good job."

"Link! Link Larkin!" they heard from a distance. He looked like a politician gladhanding through the room. He hugged and kissed each person until his eyes focused on Corny. "What the Hell? Corny Collins, you're here! No one told me. Man you look the same, except that added grey, but hell, father time catches up with all of us." He said as he hugged him. He looked down at Maybelle and leaned in to kiss her cheek, "Hey Momma, how are you feeling?"

"Couldn't be better, little man." She replied as she threw her arms around him. "Where's Genevieve and the kids?"

"My mom has the kids, Genevieve is with her golf pro. Permanently. Guess he had a better swing than me. Vegas does that to people I guess. We'll talk about that later. Inez told me that things are looking up for you. Did I hear right?"

Maybelle was glad to share her news. "Really looking up. Jesus be praised. Now Honey you just get yourself something to eat. We've got tons and you're looking a bit skinny to me boy."

"Yeah, right. These pants are new and have gotten tight already. I've been hitting the buffets back home" He glanced over and met Amber's eyes. Corny instinctively slipped his arm around her waist and pull her towards him. "Well Ms. Von Tussle, what's up here?" He looked at Corny. "So you got the cupcake, Old Man?"

Corny smiled and kissed her forehead, "Yup, and she's pretty sweet too. She's a keeper." Amber smiled uncomfortably.

Link grinned, "You don't have to tell me. I tasted it, remember?"

She felt Corny stiffen. Amber's eyes narrowed. "In your dreams, Larkin. Only in your dreams." She smiled sweetly.

He laughed. "Okay, you win. I need a hug anyway." He grabbed her from Corny and gave her a hug. His arms relaxed and Amber looked up at him. He wasn't returning that glance. "Hi Link." She heard Tracy say from behind her.

"Hey Trace, how are you?" He moved toward her. His arms encircled her as if she were glass and would break. He stayed there. She stayed there. Amber looked at Maybelle and she winked. "Hey you two. Been a while huh?"

Link broke the embrace and cleared his throat. "Um, yeah." Tracy was flushed. Amber couldn't help but giggle as she covered her mouth. Maybe it was Baltimore. People say that Virginia is for Lovers, but Maryland is doing a pretty good job too.

"Link! Man you made it!" Seaweed smacked him on the back. "Tracy come on, let's show Mr. Vegas Man how we party back in our city. Penny will want to see you. Both" He smiled at Tracy. Seaweed had always

watched out for her.

"Well that was unexpected wasn't it." Corny whispered in Amber's ear. "How much cupcake did that boy taste, Sugar?"

"Not as much as you." She said honestly.

He smiled at her, "He was the only one who didn't call you the Ice Princess. Boys talk you know."

"Boys lie too, you know." She countered, "and puff themselves up as running from conquest to conquest. Link had some machismo in him. But he got no farther than any of those other boys. Link was show. Besides, I was distracted elsewhere. Some smooth host had my heart." She said took his hand.

"Well, it looks like you lost him to Tracy again." Corny teased. "Look at that." She followed his glance. Link was standing close to Tracy. Penny was speaking to him. Every once in a while, she would step toward him and he would slide closer to the sweet brunette. Finally, his arm went around her shoulders. Honestly, it looked right. Just right.

"That's alright, I'll comfort you." He rubbed her arm.

She smiled. "You already have."

The party continued well into the night. Too much talking with friends, too many memories and stories to tell. Tracy fell asleep first, in the crook of Link's arm on one of the couches. Her girls had begged to spend the night with the other kids and she conceded. They were all upstairs staying in the game room, giggling in their sleeping bags with flashlights. When she had returned to the living room where the party was winding down, Link guided her next to him and put an arm around her. Those in the room smiled.

Maybelle had retired long before, Seaweed and Penny excused themselves to check on the kids then head to bed. Tracy with Link. Amber with Corny. They laughed and reminisced. Amber nodded off about three. Link and Corny were alone.

"How long has that been going on, Old Man?" Link asked tipping a head at Amber.

"Not long enough, I will tell you. And how about this one. How long on this one? I never heard anyone speak of this before." Corny asked pointing to Tracy.

"Always. But you know the show-biz life. You have to have the best looking doll on your arm. Genevieve was just that. Pretty fine. She actually hated my "pal" Tracy. When she thought she was just an old friend, she was okay with it. When she was told the whole story, she wasn't happy at all. I had to cut the friendship to keep my wife. I paid a lot for that woman. Cash." Link laughed.

Corny snorted a laugh. He had dealt one or two of those woman before. High maintenance, every one of them.

"When Inez called me to confirm my plans, I told her that I would not be bringing my wife again, ever. That girl's pretty slick. If she

didn't just bring the conversation around to Tracy's divorce. As manipulative as her mother." Link stated plainly.

Corny threw his eyes to the ceiling and nodded with a smile.

"But I have to say Corny, I missed her." Link looked at Tracy and brushed a hair from her forehead, "She has always been the most fun loving, most vivacious woman I've known. Nothing gets her down. She's beautiful inside out. I'm not going to give her up again. We'll work something out with the distance. It will all be fine."

Corny stretched around Amber's head. "Good for you, young man. You made the right decision. Damn Link, it's four am. Flip off that light and I'm gonna crash right here. She's got the car keys anyway."

"Night Old Man, it's great to see you again." Link said as he turned off the light.

"Same here Old Friend. It's good to be home."

They both slept well that night.

29. Chapter 29

Chapter Twenty-nine November 5th, 1982.

Amber couldn't help but smile at the bouquet of red roses in the dressing room. She pulled the card.

"AVT,

Break a leg. I'll be watching. Waiting for you.

xxxooo

Mr. C"

Well, that about said it. She tingled. Geez, it had been too long, but the wait was almost over. She would be with him tonight. And he would not soon forget it. She would do things to him that she only read about in steamy romance novels. She glanced down at her watch, Yikes! She had twenty minutes until the show started. She fluffed her hair, smoothed her dress and headed out.

The show would be live for the dances and music. Video for the interviews. The

audience was filing in. Link and Maybelle stood ready behind the old podium. The set looked exactly the same. Anything Inez couldn't find as original, they had set designers make The girls swished in crinolines and the boys in suits. My God, she walked right into 1962. It was almost scary. She expected her mother to come strutting over to her. Amber sighed. She had asked Mother's caregivers to turn the show on for her. She hoped she would be able to get her mind around it. They had agreed and wished her the best. She kissed her mother's cheek and left.

This was too wonderful of a day to get melancholy. The show and then

him. Inez broke into her thoughts, "Are you ready?"

"About as ready as I'll ever be." She smiled and hugged her, "Oh Lord Inez, it's gonna happen. We've worked so hard. This show has changed my life. I owe you so much!"

"It's all as it should be." Inez declared.

"Well break a leg, Mrs. Franklin."

"And you, Ms Von Tussle." Inez hugged her one more time. "We're back to being the Nicest Kids in Town."

Amber ran over to give a couple final directions to the cameramen. The minutes ticked down quickly. Teleprompter ready, she announced, "Ladies and Gentlemen, it's showtime." The audience applauded. "Places! And we are on in five, four, three, two, then one. She pointed to Link.

"Hey there America! Don't change that channel cause it's time for the Corny Collins 25th Anniversary Reunion Show!" and the audience exploded.

The Council ran out and began to dance as large screens dropped down behind them and ran the classic opening. Only on the stage, all the dancers, black and white, were totally intermixed, just the way Corny had wanted it. Amber couldn't help but move to the beat. Link danced and swayed just the way Corny did. He had coached him at Maybelle's for a while. It would have been perfect if he was there, but it didn't matter now. It was marvelous!

After the dance, the Council ran quickly to change. She arranged for them to do the rest of the show in modern clothes. She wanted America to see her family as they were today. Fantastic.

Link was cued and looked into the camera. "Good evening, my name is Link Larkin and may I introduce my cohost, Motormouth Maybelle Stubbs!"

"Welcome America! We hope you are as happy to see us as we are to be here." Maybelle sang out. "Thank You!" she did a little bow to the still applauding crowd. "Just in case you've forgotten, let's watch a bit of the Corny Collins Show."

A few minutes of video displayed on the screen. They even showed the "Miss Teenage Hairspray of 1962" when Inez was crowned. Amber insisted on that.

Link and Maybelle narrated the 60's, the Civil Rights movement and Vietnam. Tyrone was introduced as the war hero he was, as pictures of Brad and Little Mo were on either side of him. He bowed and walked off to huge applause.

Seaweed and Penny showed all their kids and Penny held little May. They spoke of the hardships of an interracial couple in the sixties. It was all very moving.

Link and Tracy did their dance. They were darling. They even kissed at the end. Amber thought, all is right with the world.

The screens flashed video of the Charmettes and Inez walked out hand in hand with Tamara. They bowed to the cheers and applause.

"We'd like to dedicate this song to a Dear Friend lost long ago. We know Charisse is watching us right now. We love you Sister." Inez sent a kiss heavenward as Charisse's face appeared on the screens. The music swelled and they sang like angels. It was a song that was a particular favorite of Charisse. There wasn't a dry eye in the house.

The hour flew by. Amber looked at her watch. There were fifteen minutes left. After the commercial break, Maybelle would call her out to the stage. She would take a bow and say a few words. There would be a final dance, then boom, she was gone. He was waiting for her and nothing would delay that. She took a deep breath and flipped her hair.

The monitor that displayed the commercial sang out the final notes of the jingle. "Places, everyone! We are on in five, fourâ€¦" fingers displayed three, two, one."

"Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome back." Maybelle smiled at the camera. "The Corny Collins Show was a true ground breaker in television. Today, the amount of risk involved with interracial dancers together on the same stage, seems a distant memory. It was very real then"

Amber was lost. She flipped the pages of her script. Maybelle was improvising. Oh well, she deserved it. Amber could get the cues anyway.

"One person made all of this come true. Without this friend, we would not have made history. The Show would not have broken the barrier. Ladies and Gentlemen, I am pleased and proud, to introduce to you, Mr. Corny Collins."

Amber felt a breeze go by her. That breeze was him. Her mouth fell. "Hi Amber." He said and walked onto the stage and the room went nuclear. People were standing and screaming, jumping up and down. He bowed and looked her way. He was totally clean shaven, donning a suit and his eyes sparkled as he winked at her.

She nearly dropped to the floor.

30. Chapter 30

**_Thank you everyone for sticking through this. Thanks for the read and reviews!
> Especially to Tracy without whom this story would have not been written.**

(the song can be found on YouTube if anyone is interested)

Chapter thirty

Inez came up behind her and whispered in her ear, "Are you surprised? He wanted to do this for you."

Amber looked at Inez, "It's unbelievable. Inezâ€|â€|" The council members ran out onto the stage and stood in a long line behind him. "We never did this at rehearsal." Amber said in shock.

"Oh WE did Honey!" Inez kissed her cheek, "Gotta run." And she was gone too.

Link and Maybelle came from behind the podium to give him a hug. You couldn't hear through the cheers. He put up a hand to quiet the applause and Link handed him a microphone "And now I'd like to introduce someone very near and dear to my heart." Corny began, "Without her skill and motivation, this show would not have been possible. Our three time Miss Hairspray Champion, 1959, 1960 and 1961, and General Manager of WYZT, Ms Amber Von Tussle."

She felt like she floated out onto the stage and took his hand. Her eyes were still wide when the music swelled and the boys began to sing. It was a "Ooooooooo." Amber turned. She looked at the boys as Seaweed sang, "Yi-yi. Yi-yi-yiâ€|."

She knew this song. Kenny Loggins and Stevie Nicks sang it back in 78. It had always reminded her of him. It was her car song that year and sang it over and over, wishing he was there to sing the duet with her. Now here he was. He took a deep breath, looked into her eyes and began to sing.

"Whenever I call you "Friend", I begin to think I understand

Anywhere we are, you and I have always been. Ever and ever." The council sang "Oooooo".

Amber was giddy. She looked up and couldn't help herself, she didn't even think, she leaned into him and her voice joined his.

"I see myself within your eyes, and that's all I need to show me why

Everything I do always takes me home to you.'

His eyebrows arched and he pulled her toward him. Maybelle hugged Link. The Council members smiled in surprise. A couple high fives went around. They sang out from behind. "Ever and ever" And started to Ahhhhhh.

His voice rang out, "Now I know my life has given me more than memories, day by day, we can see."

"In every moment there's a reason to carry onnnnnn." She held her final note.

He grabbed her hand and they began to slowly strut across the stage in time to the beat. The cheers started again. "Sweet love showin' us a heavenly light. I've never seen such a beautiful sight." They sang as they hit the end of the stage. He twirled her and started back. She giggled. "See love glowin' on us every night. I know forever we'll be doin' it. Sweet love showing us a heavenly light."

He brushed her cheek, "I've never seen such a beautiful sight."

"See love glowin' on us every night." They continued and he ended with, "I know forever we'll be doin' right"

She turned to him, "Whenever I call you "Friend", I believe I've come to understand,

Everywhere we are, you and I were meant to be, Forever and ever"

He took it "I think about the times to come, knowing I will be the lucky one. Ever our love will last. I always want to call you" then their voices blended, "Friend".

They started to strut again. "Sweet love showin' us a heavenly light."

"Never seen such a beautiful sight," he sang as he smiled.

"See love glowin' on us every night. I know forever we'll be doing it." They harmonized.

As the interlude started, he spun her to a waltz. The audience went nuts again. "I love you, ever and ever." He whispered to her. She didn't have time to respond before the music cued her.

"Now I know my life has given me more than memories." she sang.

He belted out as his eyes closed, "Day by day, we can see,"

Her arms went out in front of her and swept open as she held her final note, "In every moment there's a reason to carry onnnnnnnn."

Corny motioned to the Council and they moved around them and sang and danced. Link moved to Tracy and put his arm around her. They glowed.

"Sweet love showin us a heavenly light

I've never seen such a beautiful sight"

Inez made her way to Amber and threw her arms around her. There were tears in her eyes, "Oh thank you" Amber cried as she hugged back.

"Improv! You go girl!" she smiled as she wiped her eyes. "I didn't think you had it in you."

"Me either." Amber grinned.

They hugged again as the group continued, "See love glowin' on us every night. I know forever, we'll be doin it. Doin' it. Sweet loves showin' us a heavenly light."

"I've never seen such a beautiful sight." Amber sang with her whole heart as she grabbed his hand.

"See love glowin' on us every night" they all sang, "I know forever we'll be doin' it, doin' it, doin' it."

Just the girls sang, "Sweet love, sweet love, yeah, sweet

loveâ€|â€|. "

He turned to her and his voice sounded above the others, "You're the glowin' light in my life, source of pride in my life"

She responded, "Oh everything I do takes me back to you"

The audience couldn't be contained as the music faded out. He still had his arm around her waist as he brought the microphone up again.

"This is Corny Collins and for Link Larkin, Motormouth Maybelle and all of the "Nicest Kids in Town" we'd like to say thank you for joining us! Good night and God Bless." He smiled as everyone waved. The theme started and so did the hugs and congratulations.

She threw her arms around his neck, "You were amazing. Thank you so much."

He laughed, "Me? You did that song cold. That was unbelievable! You can't be beat!"

They touched foreheads, "I love you. I always have and always will." She said.

"Then show me."

She gave him a look, "Oh I'm going to." She said slyly. She grabbed his hand and started to move but he stopped her.

He turned his back to the still screaming audience, "Okay Woman. I've done everything you wanted from me. And I've waited, God Knows, I've waited. Twenty years or eight weeks, however you want to count it, I've waited. I made it real for you. Now will you make it real for me?"

He snatched her hand and slipped a small ring on her finger. She looked down. It sure looked like that kind of ring. Right finger and the whole thing. She looked into his eyes.

"Will you do this for me? Will you make it forever?" he asked seriously.

"Forever and ever." She sighed, "You can't know how much I love you."

He grinned, "But I love you more." He looked around, "Come on, let's get outta here, I think I remember something we were going to do on Maybelle's kitchen table that needs to be addressed. Baby, I need to show you something that I'm sure you'll like."

They headed out the door and no one noticed until they were gone.

End
file.